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Contents

ARTICLES

2 **Winning Races: Thri-Kreen**
By Chris Sims
They roam the desert wastelands of Athas, the wild savannas of Faerûn, and the boundless fringes of many homespun campaign worlds, but don't let their strange insectoid appearance fool you: thri-kreen are adventurers at heart.

7 **Winning Races: Kenkus**
By David Adams
Birds of a feather flock together. To a kenku, this is no mere adage but a fact of life—particularly when your life is steeped in theft, bribery, extortion, and murder.

12 **Quests for Humanity**
By Jeff Tidball
The human empire of Nerath fell to ruin long ago, but soon it will be reborn. From its ashes arises one hero destined for immortality. With each quest fulfilled, you come closer to attaining your birthright: God-Emperor of Nerath.

17 **D&D Alumni**
By James Maliszewski
We take a brief tour through the development of the game—from OD&D to the AD&D's core rulebooks.

20 **Confessions of a Full-Time Wizard**
By Shelly Mazzanoble
R&D's "Player-in-Chief" lets loose her inner geek.

23 **Eye on the Realms: The Storm Bird**
By Ed Greenwood
Out of the howling, lashing rain it comes—a portent of doom in the form of a flying ship.

27 **Eye on Dark Sun: The Tsochar**
By Rodney Thompson
A sinister race has invaded Athas. Meet the horrific tsochar, and see why they've taken a shine to the devastated world.

30 **Eye on Eberron: Eston**
By Keith Baker
Once the stronghold of House Cannith and a jewel in the crown of Cyre, the city of Eston holds treasures and secrets that some believe are worth dying for.

33 **D&D Outsider**
By Jared von Hindman
Min-maxers. Power Gamers. Charater Optimizers. Whatever you call them, should these lost souls, guilty of only mechanical excellence, be forever maligned as the foes of roleplaying and character development?

Winning Races: Thri-Kreen

By Chris Sims

Ilustrations by Ralph Horsley, Emrah Elmasli

Often thought of as monsters, thri-kreen are a reclusive and predatory people. These ancient and distinctive creatures also have a simple yet rich lifestyle.

Thri-Kreen Culture

Thri-kreen have a worldview unlike that of most other humanoids. Their behavior is deeply ingrained on a biological and spiritual level. Put simply, a thri-kreen deprived of a typical upbringing would lack refinement by thri-kreen standards but could function well based only on instinctive and inborn habits and knowledge.

All thri-kreen share a sort of ancestral memory that is as much spiritual and psionic as it is physical. A portion of a young thri-kreen's capabilities is passed down the lineage, remembered on a level where body, mind, and soul are one. Thri-kreen start with advantages and develop quickly in skill and mental capacity from birth. A thri-kreen grows, physically, from infant to adult in about five years.

A thri-kreen is born into a clutch of eggs, usually in a communal laying ground among the eggs of numerous female thri-kreen. A laying ground is a secluded

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spot that also serves as a communal burial ground, since the wisdom of the dead, as well as the shelter of their empty exoskeletons, is available, in spiritual and literal form, for the newly born. As laying time approaches, a pack of thri-kreen—a wandering tribe of many smaller family units, or clutches—travels to the laying ground to lay and bury eggs. The pack returns only when hatching time is near, so young thri-kreen must often fend for themselves for a while after birth.

This post-hatching gathering is a thri-kreen's first experience of the collective—the birth clutch. Due to ancestral memory, young thri-kreen can speak when born, and they know to hunt together. They instinctively protect one another and work together to make sure as many as possible eat. This arrangement is far from egalitarian, since the strongest young work to achieve dominance so that they can receive the largest share of food and take leadership positions.

When a pack returns to a laying ground to claim its young, the little thri-kreen do not necessarily go to the female who laid them as eggs. Indeed, the young might not be claimed by the same pack. Adults take custody of young thri-kreen as they might anything else the pack claims. Personal preference, often based on an innate sense of ancestry, and dominance helps establish who takes which child. Young thri-kreen become part of their ward's familial clutch. Once a child joins a familial clutch, he or she takes a support role right away, such as preparing food and cleaning gear. While engaged with such simple responsibilities, children are also expected to learn harder jobs, such as crafting and hunting.

The Hunt

Thri-kreen see everything in terms of the hunt. In its most basic form, the hunt is the means of survival, providing food for the individual, the clutch, and the pack. But a thri-kreen defines almost every task in terms of its hunter–prey relationship. A personal duel is each duelist's hunt for dominance or vengeance or, perhaps, thrills. Reading is a hunt for knowledge. Adventuring is a hunt for glory and riches.

A major hunt all thri-kreen engage in is the hunt for personal betterment. Thri-kreen believe that they must be strong and worthy of survival. The lazy and weak are to be reviled. It is also important that a thri-kreen's life serves to strengthen any progeny he or she might leave. Even without offspring, a successful thri-kreen strengthens his or her people from the spirit world as a revered ancestor.

A thri-kreen does not fear death. He or she fears becoming a burden or passing away without giving back to the clutch and pack. It is better to die than to fail in the personal hunt for greater and greater accomplishment. To be a forgotten ancestor is a fate worse than death.

The Ancestral Khanate

All the talk of ancestors among the thri-kreen might lead one to think that the thri-kreen imagine the dead live on in the spirit world. Thri-kreen know some of their kind go on to live among the spirits, but this is an exception rather than a rule. Individual existence after death is rare, or so the thri-kreen suppose.

When they die, most thri-kreen trust that their essence lives on in the spirit world as part of the Ancestral Khanate. This multifaceted entity holds all the knowledge and history of the thri-kreen within it. It is why, thri-kreen assert, young thri-kreen are born knowing much of what they need to survive in the world. All thri-kreen are born as extensions of the khanate, and so they have true understanding of their essential nature. Some thri-kreen can contact the khanate, augmenting natural ancestral memory, as well as drawing forth mysterious knowledge and spontaneous skill.

Khanate is the thri-kreen expression describing a semicooperative collective of numerous packs, each with a leader known as a khan. Such a collective all but rules its territory, meeting at times to decide important issues. The Ancestral Khanate, then, is a similar collective among the primal spirits, made nearly omnipotent by its internal concordance. This primal khanate is the closest entity thri-kreen have to a shared racial deity.

Reverence for the Ancestral Khanate is not a religion—thri-kreen are not given to piety. Devotion, however, often comes coupled with increased power or survivability. That fact is meaningful to a thri-kreen. Respect for the spirits garners one primal power, just as delving into primordial mysteries can lead to elemental power. Such power makes one stronger, and it allows a thri-kreen to leave a meaningful legacy.

Thri-Kreen Characters

Although thri-kreen are eerily alien to most humanoids, few can deny that a thri-kreen ally is a mighty asset. Thri-kreen, for their part, are proud of their history and uniqueness. Most thri-kreen latch on to a subset of thri-kreen traits, not only distinguishing themselves as individuals, but also making themselves more useful to the clutch or pack.

Backgrounds

Thri-kreen have a few unusual background possibilities.

Ancestral Speaker

You have a strong tie to the Ancestral Khanate. You might have a particularly good memory and recall events that you did not witness. Occasionally, the ancestors could speak through you, imparting cryptic truths. It's likely you have a magical power, whether arcane, divine, primal, or psionic. You are expected

to be an exemplar and a teacher among your people, to honor and share your gifts. How do you take this duty? Why did you set out from your pack into the wider world? Did you anger the khan or another dominant pack mate? Have the ancestors given you a greater purpose? Can you share this goal with others or is it a secret you keep?

Associated Skill: History or Nature

Knowledge Hunter

Thri-kreen recognize that knowledge is power. Belief in the Ancestral Khanate gives the gathering of knowledge a greater importance to thri-kreen as a people. Everything the thri-kreen learn continues to exist as part of the ancestral consciousness. A few thri-kreen take this fact deeply to heart, pursuing esoteric understanding as a way to strengthen their people. Upon learning hidden facts, such hunters usually share what they know. Knowledge hunters are also the likeliest thri-kreen to be truly philosophical or artistic. Why have you become a knowledge hunter? What have you learned so far? Where might these rumors and tidbits lead you? Have you learned something that puts you or your pack in danger?

Associated Skill: Arcana or Dungeoneering

Merchant Hunter

Your pack gave up the hunt for survival and undertook the hunt for wealth and, perhaps, power. Your khan might have seen that the way for continued existence lies in trade. If you live in the wild, your pack's warriors might be brigands and traders who raid and rob to gain goods to sell. Or your pack might occupy a successful position in a city or trading outpost. What is your place in thri-kreen society and the wider world? Do you still have ties to your pack, or have you gone into exile for some reason? Is the new direction your pack has taken a good thing, or is it a perversion of thri-kreen custom? Do you still serve pack interests?

Associated Skill: Diplomacy or Insight

Thri-Kreen Feats

Thri-kreen develop by focusing their attention on aspects of their selves, whether physical, mental, or spiritual. Each thri-kreen becomes an inimitable expression of its kind, changing in ways other humanoids might find hard to imagine. The following feats are available to any thri-kreen who meets the prerequisites.

Thri-Kreen Antennae

You have honed your senses as only a thri-kreen can, making your most distinctive sensory organs more than vestigial.

Prerequisite: Thri-kreen

Benefit: You gain a +1 feat bonus to Perception checks and Insight checks. You also have blindsight 1. Further, you always know what direction you are facing.

Thri-Kreen Scuttler

Your six limbs and long form are perfect for low crawling. Being prone is little hindrance for you.

Prerequisite: Thri-kreen

Benefit: When you take the crawl action, you can move at full speed instead of half speed.

Thri-Kreen Scuttling Master

You have mastered the art of stealthy hunting, and you can scuttle away from enemies who have engaged you.

Prerequisite: 11th level, Thri-Kreen Scuttler feat

Benefit: You can shift while prone. While you are prone, you do not take the –5 penalty to Stealth checks for moving more than 2 squares.

Thri-Kreen Shooter

You can use your middle limbs to wield a light crossbow or hand crossbow.

Prerequisite: Thri-kreen, proficiency with the light crossbow or hand crossbow

Benefit: While you wield a melee weapon using your upper limbs, you can use a light crossbow or hand crossbow wielded with your middle limbs to make ranged attacks. Ranged attacks you make in this way do not provoke opportunity attacks.

Thri-Kreen Thrower

Your middle limbs are useful for holding and throwing light weapons.

Prerequisite: Thri-kreen, proficiency with a light thrown weapon

Benefit: While you wield a melee weapon in your upper limbs, you can use light thrown weapons wielded in your middle limbs to make ranged attacks. Ranged attacks you make in this way do not provoke opportunity attacks.

Thri-Kreen Weapon Master

The sacred weapons of the thri-kreen are like deadly extensions of your body.

Prerequisite: Thri-kreen

Benefit: You gain proficiency with the gythka and the chatkcha. Additionally, you gain a +2 feat bonus to damage rolls with these weapons. This bonus increases to +3 at 11th level and +4 at 21st level.

Thri-Kreen Wild Talent

Thri-kreen can be naturally psionic. You have emphasized this quality and acquired a wild talent cantrip (see the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*).

Prerequisite: Thri-kreen, Psionic Augmentation class feature, *thri-kreen claws* racial power

Benefit: You gain one wild talent cantrip of your choice. Additionally, once per encounter, you can lose a use of your *thri-kreen claws* power as a minor action to regain 1 power point.

Thri-Kreen Utility Powers

The insectile thri-kreen are distinct from other races in more than appearance. Every thri-kreen has latent traits derived from its unique physiology, nonmammalian heritage, or ancient bloodline. Any of these attributes can be awakened with enough focus, giving individual thri-kreen surprising and unique capabilities.

Like thri-kreen feats, thri-kreen racial utility powers help you emphasize your race beyond the traits you gain due to your race at first level. Taking a racial utility power means your character has awakened a talent latent in all thri-kreen due to their heritage. Your character must be a thri-kreen to gain and use thri-kreen powers. If you want to further emphasize your race, consider taking a thri-kreen racial paragon path.

Gaining a Racial Utility Power: Racial utility powers are similar to utility powers granted by a class, except that you must be a member of the race to gain and use a race's powers. Whenever you gain a level that grants you a utility power from your class, you can choose a racial utility power in place of a class power. The racial utility power must be of the same level as or lower in level than the class power you would have gained.

You can use retraining to replace a class power with a racial utility power or vice versa, as long as the new power is of the same level as or lower in level than the replaced power. You cannot replace a utility power from a paragon path or an epic destiny with a racial utility power.

Spellbooks and Racial Utility Powers: If you take a racial utility power, you do not add any wizard utility powers to your spellbook at that level. If you later use retraining to take a wizard utility power in place of a racial utility power, you do not add any powers to your spellbook.

Level 2 Utility Powers

Mantis Jump — Thri-Kreen Utility 2

You coil and spring instinctively, covering a tremendous distance without much effort.

Encounter
Move Action **Personal**
Effect: You jump a number of squares equal to your speed. This movement does not provoke opportunity attacks.

Pheromone Release — Thri-Kreen Utility 2

Although imperceptible to most creatures, your pheromones have a significant effect on the behavior of other creatures.

Encounter ✦ Charm
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You gain a +5 power bonus to the next Bluff, Diplomacy, or Intimidate check you make before the end of your next turn. You can also gain this bonus to Nature checks made to calm or influence a beast.

Level 6 Utility Powers

Chameleon Chitin — Thri-Kreen Utility 6

Your powerful mind can rapidly change your exoskeleton to match the light and objects around you, allowing you to gain the advantage or slip away from the fight.

Encounter ✦ Psionic
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You make a Stealth check. If you have any cover or concealment, you gain a +5 power bonus to this check. You can remain hidden without cover or concealment as long as you make no attacks and you take no action that requires you to make another Stealth check.

Mantis Dodge — Thri-Kreen Utility 6

The attack comes from far enough away that you react instinctively to leap away from its brunt.

Encounter
Immediate Interrupt **Personal**
Trigger: You are hit by an area attack or a ranged attack against your AC or Reflex.
Effect: You take only half damage from the triggering attack and can jump up to half your speed. This movement does not provoke opportunity attacks.

Level 10 Utility Powers

Antennae Sense — Thri-Kreen Utility 10

Your antennae are sensitive enough to pick up vibrations around you, giving you a clear picture of your surroundings for a moment.

Encounter
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You gain blindsight 10 until the end of your next turn.
Special: If you have the Thri-Kreen Antennae feat, you can use this power as an immediate reaction when you are blinded or otherwise deprived of sight.

Insect Mind — Thri-Kreen Utility 10

Your instincts take over as your higher mental functions fail you.

Daily ✦ Psionic
No Action **Personal**
Trigger: You start your turn dazed, dominated, stunned, or unconscious, and you have at least 1 hit point.
Effect: You ignore the triggering effect until the end of this turn.
Special: If you have the Thri-Kreen Wild Talent feat, you can sustain this effect until the end of your next turn by taking a minor action and spending 1 power point.

Level 16 Utility Powers

Hive Consciousness — Thri-Kreen Utility 16

You extend your mind through your antennae, uniting the minds and senses of your allies with yours.

Daily ✦ Psionic
Minor Action **Close** burst 10
Target: You and each ally in the burst
Effect: Until the end of the encounter, each target cannot be flanked and gains a +2 power bonus to saving throws. Unless a creature or an object is invisible to or hidden from all targets, it is invisible to or hidden from none of them. Each target also gains telepathy 10 until the end of the encounter, but can use this telepathy only on other targets of this power.
Special: If you have the Thri-Kreen Antennae feat, each target also gains the benefit of that feat while the effect lasts.

Kinetic Chitin — Thri-Kreen Utility 16

Reacting to an impact, your exoskeleton temporarily hardens.

Encounter ✦ Psionic
Immediate Reaction **Personal**
Trigger: You take damage.
Effect: You gain resist 10 to all damage until the end of your next turn.

About the Author

Chris Sims has played roleplaying games for thirty years, and he has helped produce games for more than ten. He recently returned to Wizards of the Coast as a technical editor for the Dungeons & Dragons® game. Before that he spent his days at his home office in the Seattle exurbs, working as a freelance editor, developer, writer, and blogger. You can read Chris's "Analysis Paralysis" blog at critical-hits.com, and you can follow @ChrisSSims on Twitter.

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Winning Races: Kenku

By David Adams

Illustration by Peter Bergting

Kenkus are a secretive race, inclined to reveal little of their history. Those who allege to have spoken with them report that kenkus consider themselves among the first children of the Raven Queen. After her ascent to godhood, she created flying humanoids from the world's normal ravens. The kenkus' affinity for shadow magic seems to supports that claim.

An age-old legend says the demon lord Pazuzu corrupted some kenkus, offering power in exchange for the true name of the Raven Queen. Those treacherous kenkus nearly succeeded, but the Raven Queen foiled their plot. In one version of the tale, she cursed all kenkus with a plague that diminished their numbers and changed them to flightless beings. Another version says that Pazuzu visited this sickness on them for their failure, and that the Raven Queen did nothing to prevent the curse from running its course. Whatever the case, kenkus lost the power of flight and had to learn to live among the land-bound races.

Kenkus found places to hide on the outskirts of established societies. Concealed by the shadows of civilization, they scavenged what they needed, eking out a meager existence while remaining unnoticed. They also began to cultivate their natural talent for stealing everything from food to secrets, working together to create networks of allies. Kenkus formed smaller enclaves, which they refer to as flocks. Each flock within a region holds one or more dwellings called aeries.

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Kenku

Cunning survivors, sly allies, hoarders of secrets

Racial Traits

Average Height: 5′ 0″-5′ 6″
Average Weight: 110-150 lb.

Ability Scores: +2 Charisma; +2 Dexterity or +2 Intelligence
Size: Medium
Speed: 6 squares
Vision: Low-light vision
Languages: Common, choice of one other
Skill Bonuses: +2 Bluff, +2 Stealth

Mimicry: You can imitate sounds and voices you have heard. Each time you attempt to mimic a sound, you must succeed on a Bluff check to fool those who hear the sound into believing it is genuine.
Flock Effect: When you have combat advantage against a creature as a result of flanking it, you gain a +3 bonus to attack rolls against it, rather than the normal +2.
Flock Tactics: You have the *flock tactics* power.

Flock Tactics **Kenku Racial Utility**

With your experience as part of a kenku flock, you have a knack for maximizing the advantages of teamwork.

Encounter
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Choose one of the following effects each time you use this power.
- ✦ An enemy adjacent to your ally grants combat advantage to you until the start of your next turn.
- ✦ You use the aid another or the aid attack action. If you succeed, you grant a +3 bonus, rather than the normal +2 bonus.

Physical Qualities

Kenkus are easily identified by their obviously avian appearance. A kenku's head resembles that of a raven, complete with small, beady black eyes and a large, dark beak. Sleek black feathers cover its body, ending at the knees and elbows. Its arms and legs are covered in scaly black skin, and its hands and feet end in talons.

Young kenkus hatch from eggs. Within a month they are strong enough to join the flock, and they reach maturity in five years. Most die before reaching their third decade, a consequence of the harsh life in a flock, but extremely hardy or devious kenkus have been known to survive for decades. These rare individuals often become leaders of powerful and well-connected flocks.

Obsessed with avoiding attention, many kenkus garb themselves in drab, loose-fitting clothing that allows them to conceal their features. They favor colors that blend well with shadows and disdain obvious ornamentation. Many kenkus adopt or learn to mimic the mannerisms of nearby peoples.

Attitudes and Beliefs

The first things every kenku learns to do are to hide, steal, and form alliances. No flock tolerates new members that are mere mouths to feed, so fledglings must make themselves useful. They often use trickery and stealth to get what they need and want, forming small gangs to better fulfill their objectives.

Fledglings learn to exploit the talents of others to ensure their own survival. The tasks they are expected to perform for the flock can be dangerous, so reliable allies are often the keys to success. Those who survive such hardships and take these harsh lessons to heart grow into tough survivors who combine a pragmatic outlook with strong bonds of friendship.

Anxiety is the typical state of mind for most kenkus. Their beady eyes flit about constantly, ever vigilant for some unexpected threat, and they never stray far from deep shadows. Their penchant for skullduggery earns them enemies, so they flinch at loud or sudden sounds. Living in the shadows means that kenkus know and fear what might lurk there. As a result, they are seldom willing to travel alone: Survival demands cooperation.

Kenku Communities

Rigid hierarchy dominates most flocks, with older and more skillful kenkus holding the most influence and power. Few members of an aerie have anything to hide—such honesty among peers prevents others from using secrets against them to usurp their status within the pecking order.

The social structure of every flock demands much of its members. Flocks scavenge to provide basic necessities, and even the young are expected to contribute. Most fledglings act as spies and sentries, providing essential information for the flock to operate effectively.

This organization is similar to that of many thieves' guilds. A flock hoards goods and secrets, using both to manipulate local authorities. Kenkus are not concerned with abstract morality, being more interested in social status and survival. They steal, bribe, extort, and even murder to get what they need.

Although most flocks are isolated from each other, a few have widespread influence. The best known are described below.

Legacy

Led by a reclusive kenku known only as Kalko, Legacy might have the widest sphere of influence of any flock. It is known to operate in several cities and towns, and it likely has connections to many more. The flock has carved out its existence by

manipulating trade within the territories containing its aeries.

Operatives for the flock work ceaselessly to blackmail any whom Legacy can exploit. A merchant in the grip of the flock's ruthless talons is forced to move merchandise, legal and otherwise, for the kenkus. Even adventurers become targets when the flock needs someone to recover a dangerous item.

Talons of Rekrok

Few know how to reach this elusive group of assassins. Even among kenkus, the existence of this flock and its leader is a rare secret. Its numbers are small, and the flock migrates between large cities where its services might be in demand. Most of the assassins who belong to the Talons of Rekrok locate their own clientele, using rumors and secrets to identify potential customers.

Nightswift

Unlike traditional flocks, the members of Nightswift do not dwell together in the same aeries. Instead, their operatives are spread throughout other flocks. Although some think their presence has a sinister purpose, most Nightswifts are simply information brokers. They gather far-flung secrets, news, and lore, which they distribute to any who are willing to pay. Ekra Silverbeak manages this disparate network of informants and knows more juicy gossip than all the rest of them. She is also quick to recruit any kenku with the talents she needs to root out the darkest secrets.

Kenku Adventurers

The pressures of flock hierarchy cause many young kenkus to strike out on their own. With their natural talent for collaboration, they readily take to the adventuring life. Other kenkus adventure on behalf of their flock, seeking to increase its influence and power. Some of those who survive this harrowing career might return to their flocks and transform them into powerful organizations.

Assassin

Kenkus have an affinity for shadow magic, and they excel at the skills required for successful assassination. They tend to live in larger cities, which are also the best markets for hired killers. Kenku assassins prefer to distract their victims or lure them into ambush by mimicking close confidants. They learn all they can of their targets' deepest secrets before arranging a kill, for sale or leverage later.

Bard

With the ability to mimic anything they hear, kenkus make excellent bards, able to regale crowds with tales enhanced by captivating sounds. Among the aeries, they tell stories of cunning kenkus who heroically overcome their foes with trickery. Passing down such legends inspires each new generation.

Rogue

Kenkus have few qualms about doing whatever it takes to survive. The skills they acquire in youth give them everything they need to be effective rogues. Although their talents are best suited to stealthy larceny, kenku rogues excel at setting up clever ambushes and use superior tactics to overwhelm targets.

Psion

Few kenkus are naturally gifted with psionic power, but those who are use their abilities to wrench knowledge from the minds of others. Kenku psions are clever manipulators, sowing doubt and fear in their targets to trick them into making a mistake or divulging a useful secret.

Roleplaying a Kenku

When creating a kenku adventurer, here are a few points to consider.

Secrets are your strength. Every kenku knows that knowing what someone else wants hidden gives you power over that person. You always keep your ears open for bits of gossip or little-known information that you might be able to exploit later. Although you don't hesitate to resort to extortion or bribery, you are careful not to call in all such favors at once. Having options in a crisis makes your secrets all the more useful tools.

Allies make you stronger. Life in an aerie is tough. Fledglings survive by forming partnerships and complex alliances. These connections provide information, resources, and future assistance. Although you deal in lies and deceit, you are loath to turn on your companions. You are also always on the lookout for ways to develop your network of contacts and potential allies.

Fight to survive. When events turn desperate, you work all the harder. Your people are always pragmatic, recognizing that rare is the situation that leaves no option for survival. This attitude is what allowed ancient kenku rebels to scratch out an existence while on the run from the Raven Queen.

Try to avoid notice. Those whom your people have exploited are more than happy to end your life. The best way to escape enemies is to keep hidden.

You rarely reveal your true identity, relying on your allies to ask questions while you hide nearby. Only in dire need do you risk letting anyone catch a glimpse of you.

Kenku Characteristics: Anxious, cunning, deceptive, gregarious, sly, secretive, stealthy, tenacious

Male Names: Akar, Barok, Elkrek, Hekar, Jedrik, Kalko, Korik, Kynek, Nalik, Norik, Osrik, Rekrok

Female Names: Deidra, Ekra, Karrah, Kelkra, Naldara, Okara, Sedra, Seikra, Tessah, Tristah

Kenku Feats

The feats in this section enhance kenku capabilities.

Improved Flock Tactics

In the company of allies you are a deadly menace.

Prerequisite: Kenku, *flock tactics* racial power

Benefit: When your *flock tactics* power causes an enemy to grant combat advantage to you, you also gain a +3 feat bonus to damage rolls against that enemy until the start of your next turn. When you use your *flock tactics* power to take the aid attack action, your ally gains combat advantage with his or her next attack against the chosen enemy, instead of gaining the bonus from the aid attack action.

Kenku Ventriloquist

You mix magic with verse and song, elevating your mundane ability to mimic sounds and voices.

Prerequisite: Kenku, trained in Bluff

Benefit: When you speak or use your Mimicry racial feature, you can make the sound seem to originate from a square within 5 squares of you. You must succeed on a Bluff check to fool listeners into believing the sound came from that location. If the square is occupied by a creature, that creature knows it didn't make the sound, and you take a –2 penalty to the Bluff check against other listeners.

Kenku Utility Powers

When your kenku character gains a class utility power after 1st level, you can forgo taking a power granted to you by your class. Instead, you gain a kenku utility power of the same level or lower. You can use retraining to replace the power later, replacing it with a utility power (a class, a skill, or a kenku power) of the same level or lower.

Beak Mask

You tap into innate shadow affinity to disguise your avian features so you can walk unnoticed among those who are not your kind. Most kenkus take on specific "masks," each time appearing as a chosen individual.

Beak Mask **Kenku Utility 2**

You craft a new face for yourself out of light and shadow.

Daily ✦ Illusion, Shadow
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You can take on the appearance of any humanoid of a build and size similar to yours, including a specific individual whom you've seen. Your clothing and equipment remain unchanged, and you gain neither the abilities nor the mannerisms of the chosen form. The illusion lasts for 1 hour, although you can end it as a minor action. You must keep the same appearance for the entire duration.

Anyone who attempts to see through your ruse makes an Insight check opposed by your Bluff check, and you gain a +5 power bonus to your check.

Rally the Flock

Every kenku knows how to make the most of having a coterie of allies at hand, but your companions don't always know when you need them. You have devised a number of tricks and signals to let your allies quickly get closer to you.

Rally the Flock **Kenku Utility 2**

You give a croaking call to your allies, signaling an open path for them to come to your aid.

Encounter
Minor Action **Close** burst 3
Target: Each ally who can hear you in the burst
Effect: Each target can shift up to 2 squares as a free action but must end this movement closer to you.

Shadow Feathers

Kenkus exploit every advantage they can, even taking inspiration from natural processes such as the shedding of old plumage. You have developed a technique that fills the air around you with shadowy feathers, as if you had instantly molted, allowing you to conceal your actual location for a short time.

Shadow Feathers **Kenku Utility 6**

Dark feathers seem to explode from you, briefly hiding you from sight.

Encounter ✦ Illusion, Shadow
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You gain total concealment until the end of your next turn or until you attack.

Shadow in the Flock

By adopting an unassuming posture, manipulating the shadows, and staying close to allies, you can avoid being noticed.

Shadow in the Flock **Kenku Utility 6**

You keep out of sight, flitting among your friends' shadows.

Encounter ✦ Shadow
Move Action **Personal**
Requirement: You must be adjacent to an ally.
Effect: You shift up to your speed. If you end this movement adjacent to an ally, you can make a Stealth check to become hidden from enemies that are not adjacent to you. For this check, you ignore the –5 penalty for moving more than 2 squares.

Ancestral Wings

Whispered stories claim kenkus could soar with the ravens before their fall from grace. You have learned the truth of these tales and discovered that, by communing with the spirits of your ancestors, you can temporarily regain the gift of flight.

Ancestral Wings **Kenku Utility 10**

The spirits of your ancestors grant you shadowy wings.

Daily ✦ Primal
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Until the end of the encounter, you have a fly speed equal to your speed (altitude limit 4).

About the Author

David Adams is a retail sales professional who inhabits a world with a ruthless pecking order where closely guarded secrets often mean the difference between life and death. The labor of his scant free time can be seen in past issues of *Dragon* magazine and *Kobold Quarterly*, and as part of Alea Publishing Group's recent *Golem Grimoire*.

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Quests for Humanity

By Jeff Tidball

Illustrations by Wayne England, Vincent Proce, and Howard Lyon

To be human is to be part of an unstoppable force in the world. Humans have always possessed great perseverance and versatility above all other traits. The potential for heroism and glory lives inside each one, because by its nature the human race does not settle for second best. For thousands of years human nations, institutions, and individuals have pushed back frontiers, overthrown those who opposed them, and built mighty civilizations on both virgin territory and the moss-covered ruins of earlier cultures.

Humans' versatility shows in every task they undertake as a group. Give them nothing to start with but a sea of baking sand, and they develop a culture of unconquerable nomads for whom heat is strength. Forbid enslaved humans to carry their traditional weapons, and they turn their very hands and tools against those foolish enough to presume their subjugation. The history of the human race is made up of myriad such tales of triumph born from adversity.

The indomitability of humans is both a blessing and a curse. Their unshakable resolve drives them to keep fighting even when the cause seems lost—and often that very refusal to quit can turn the tide of a conflict. But this same adamant will also drives humans to villainy, subjugating all who stand against them and pursuing ultimate power no matter the cost to others. The seeds of human empires' inevitable downfall are sown in such insatiable desire for expansion and control.

The last human empire, Nerath, reached to the far ends of the world, bringing strange and distant lands under its sway until it too crumbled to dust. Now, a century later, the scattered remnants of old Nerath are being unearthed and restored by its determined and resourceful heirs. Perhaps you will be the one to bring a new age of human glory to the world.

What's Your Human Nature?

If you're playing a human character, you already identify with that race's versatility and ambition. The quests described below can help you set goals for your character that feel quintessentially human but are also relevant to your Dungeon Master's campaign. Undertaking one or more of these quests lets you express fundamental human qualities in D&D® worlds: indomitability, thirst for power, near bottomless reserves of strength, resourcefulness, determination—and even hubris.

If you decide to pursue one of these quests, talk to your Dungeon Master about what you have in mind. He or she can determine how best to fit it into other elements of the campaign and set an appropriate reward for achieving it, including experience points and perhaps a monetary or magic treasure award. It's up to the DM to determine what obstacles lie in the way to reaching your goal and to give you the opportunity to overcome those challenges.

Each of the descriptions below indicates whether the goal is most appropriate as a major or minor quest. In general, a quest shared with your party is major; a personal one is minor. Many of these quests, especially at lower levels, are minor—they're intended to express the unique outlook, strengths,

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and circumstances of your human character (unless everyone in the party has the same history). Some quests have a short-term goal, while others should keep you returning to the wilds—even driving the whole campaign for a time.

Heroic Quests

These quests are appropriate to the beginning of your character's adventuring career. Although limited in the grand scope of the world, they prepare you for more important things to come. Heroic tier quests often focus on personal development, or on the problems of your immediate region.

Breaking Bonds (Minor)

You are either enslaved or indentured, to an individual or to society. Perhaps you were born into servitude, captured in a recent military campaign, or forced to pay off some debt (whether or not you were responsible for it). Your master could be fair or cruel, and your work honorable or intolerable. You are resolved to win your freedom, whatever the cost. You would rather die free than live as a slave.

Your master might be willing to free you if certain conditions are met. If you are indentured, you might buy your freedom if you can come up with the funds. Alternatively, your master might promise to release you on successful completion of some special (and dangerous) mission—assuming you survive. On the other hand, your only hope might be escape, perhaps further complicated by the need to avoid pursuit by creative measures (such as staging your own death).

A party of slaves seeking freedom can make for an interesting campaign. In such a case, completing the quest should earn rewards for all members.

Unjustly Accused (Minor)

You have been charged with, and perhaps convicted of, a crime you did not commit. You might have been deliberately framed, been a convenient patsy, or taken the blame completely by accident. Whether the accusation is terrible or petty, you cannot bear to have your name and honor tarnished. You are determined to set the record and the matter straight, although you have few if any clues as to the actual perpetrator.

Your culture could offer a framework for clearing your name: Protesting your innocence and pledging some sort of security might allow you limited freedom to set things right. If you are not so fortunate, the first step in your quest could require you to get free of your bonds, perhaps en route to the scaffold. One way or another, achieving this objective will require all your wits and resources.

This could be a major quest, and the basis of a unique campaign, if all the members of your adventuring party were set up for the same crime.

Only One Remains (Minor)

You are the last survivor of your family, village, city, or culture. The others might have died long ago or recently. Were they wiped out in war, killed by some horrible disease, or felled by a massive natural disaster? Perhaps you survived by accident, having been away from home when tragedy struck, or a random factor spared your life, such as being immune to the plague or unnoticed by the attackers. Maybe some deity, or destiny itself, intervened on your behalf.

Whatever happened, you will not let your heritage die, even if you should fall. You might not know where to begin, but you are the only one left to defy the forces that laid low the rest. Those to come—a generation or a millennium from now—will see of what stern stuff their forebears were made.

Although a minor quest, this goal has great scope and can set the campaign's tone. Others in your party might become involved if they have a stake in the resurgence of your line or culture; this situation can transform your personal journey into a major quest.

Paragon Quests

As you move into the paragon tier, your quests push you beyond your homeland or your established base of operations to fight against enemies that threaten entire nations and menace great institutions. The deeds you undertake at this point in your career set the stage for the destiny that you know awaits you.

The Highway of Old (Major)

In the days of the empire of Nerath, a great road linked two human cities. This safe overland route was a source of prosperity as well as pride for both cities, but it was destroyed in the war that ended the empire. Now the wilderness has overgrown the paving stones, fell creatures threaten any who dare the road, and commerce between the cities has become impossible.

Perhaps you are a scion of a noble family or merchant house of either city. During your early adventuring days, you did much to reclaim your home from the encroaching wilderness. Now you turn your gaze outward. Perhaps you will not feel worthy of the name you bear until you restore the greatness of that highway of old. You might simply want to reestablish the road and the commerce it represents to increase your wealth. Or you could be driven by the need to control your surroundings and stem the tide of chaos in the world.

Now you have taken it on yourself to reopen this artery of travel. Doing so will mean fighting back the creatures that prowl the highway, clearing many leagues of thick overgrowth, and repairing a century of damage. Once those tasks are complete, you face the toughest challenge of all: Convincing the cities' inhabitants that they do not endanger their lives by traveling the road once again.

Such a massive undertaking is best tackled as a group, whether each hero's individual motivation is coin, glory, or something else.

Vengeance for the Fallen (Major or Minor)

One of your parents, or another important figure in your life, has been killed by a terrible monster, such as a dragon or a marauding giant. You will not let this crime go unpunished, and by this point in your adventuring career you have earned enough power to make sure of it.

Although you seek vengeance against the perpetrator of this crime, you are determined to show all such powerful monsters that humans will stand up to tyranny, repaying blood with blood. Such a goal is a matter of honor, but it is also practical: Others will think twice before raiding your lands. To carry out your vengeance against such a mighty enemy will require not only tremendous resolve, but also careful planning and cunning use of resources. You must be wary of excessive pride, which can cause you to overextend yourself and bring all your effort to naught.

This quest might involve the other members of your party, depending on whether they also honored the slain. Even if they have different reasons for opposing your enemy, your fellow adventurers might share your cause.

Epic Quests

At the epic tier of adventuring, you have reached the pinnacle of what mortals—and even some immortals—can accomplish. You set your sights on the highest goals that can be dreamed, and some that others cannot imagine. Perhaps you began your path with an epic goal in mind, or learned only later of hidden birthrights and prophecies foretold before your birth. You might have formed epic ambitions as you traveled the world and beyond over the course of an adventuring career.

Banish the Scourge (Major or Minor)

Although the Ruler of Ruin has returned to the Abyss in the wake of Nerath's destruction, the great gnoll horde that crushed that empire remains. Their camps stretch as far as the eye can see in the fallen empire's central lands, where slaves labor ceaselessly to serve their evil ends. Even now, a century later, the gnolls make war on any points of civilization's light that attract their attention. They show no signs of leaving—indeed, they seem intent on expanding their presence until the world is one unending, noxious gnoll warren.

Until this blight is dealt with, no human culture can aspire to greatness, and no reclaimed or rebuilt civilization can be considered stable. You intend to clear the path for humanity's resurgence by eliminating the horde of gnolls that blocks it. Whether you raise a great host, perhaps enlisting the aid of powerful creatures or deities, or unleash powerful arcane forces to eradicate their war bands, the human spirit will rise again in your wake.

To clear the way for rebuilding human civilization might be your own minor quest, while others in your party have different and equally personal reasons for destroying or driving the scourge to some far corner of the Abyss. A party composed largely or entirely of human characters might well share the same goal.

Nerath Restored (Major or Minor)

When Nerath fell, all of humanity fell with it. As one of the most powerful humans in the world, you feel the depth of that fall more keenly than most. You are also one of the only mortals capable of doing something about it.

You will see Nerath restored to its former glory, or at least, found a new human empire that spans continents, bridges oceans, and reaches to the sky. In every hamlet and city, on the walls of every keep and castle, indomitable humans will be vigilant against any force that seeks to tear down their accomplishments, whether abyssal, divine, elemental, or something else.

Your whole life has led you to this point. Achieving this ultimate goal might be a minor quest, in that it applies only to you, but it comes as the culmination of a series of quests both major and minor that can span a career, often in the company of your comrades. Such a path can lead naturally to the God-Emperor epic destiny described at the end of this article.

To Slay a God (Major)

Secret cults tell of a cast-out god who lies chained in the depths of the Abyss. As you and your companions relieved its foul worshipers of their miserable lives and petty treasures, you learned that these cults claim their deity is the true creator of humanity. According to those teachings, humans' ultimate purpose is to free this being so that it can resume its rightful dominion over the cosmos and slay the gods who imprisoned it.

Everything you know in your heart to be true rebels against this mythic history as a willful misrepresentation of the gods' justice. Yet these cults continue to spread like noxious but vigorous weeds, taking root in the wilderness among creatures both actively malign and simply dangerous. Their tendrils reach into human cities, spreading lies and corrupting human destiny, but like the hydra's heads, crushing one coterie of these depraved mortals only causes two more to crop up.

You believe that the only way to halt these heinous cults is to find the prison of this ancient deity, descend into the Abyss, and slay the vile god. The cult's black heart will be stilled that day once and for all. You will need the cooperation of every member of your company—and the assistance of many others besides—to carry out such an ambitious deed.

Epic Destiny: God-Emperor

You place your strong hand on the tiller of the greatest human culture that has ever been built, guiding that ship ever toward the horizon until your will is so ingrained that it sails itself, evermore.

Prerequisite: 21st level, human

As you performed ever greater deeds throughout the cosmos, uniting the scattered humans of the world into a new empire greater even than Nerath, more and more have called you lord—even savior. And as those who look to you for leadership multiply, the whispers begin that you are more than human. Not only are you set apart from mortals, but your destiny is to ascend even further, beyond the petty concerns of the material world. This ascension will mark not only your own greatness, but also that of the civilization you champion.

At first you remain a physical presence in the capital of your realm, guiding your governors and generals with a firm hand, but over time your laws and commandments take on their own life. The leaders of your society increasingly divine your will from this body of knowledge rather than hearing it from your lips, while your focus gradually moves to the planes-spanning affairs of gods and demigods. Eventually, you fade from the world and join their ranks, a

great patron invoked in ceremonies and on holy days, to whom the greatest achievements of your civilization are dedicated.

Living the Destiny

You do not plan to ascend to the Astral Sea in a blinding flash of glory, because you understand that abandoning your empire so suddenly would undo it. A slower transition meets your obligation to those who revere you, as well as giving you time to adjust to the new duties that the gods require of you.

The Temple of Your Dominion: As your empire grew, your citizens built a mighty palace for your abode, where those who seek your advice or your blessing come to listen to your words. You hear their petitions, hand down laws, and admonish them to fight for themselves against adversity. But as time passes, your people require your physical presence less and less, while your thoughts turn to weightier matters. As the centuries pass, you are seen less frequently, though none can say where you go. Eventually, your priests realize that you are present everywhere in your empire; you are its guiding spirit more than its physical ruler. Your ascension, in that hour, is complete.

Level 21: Gifted Ruler

You are recognized by those who follow you as the ultimate embodiment of the empire. You become the physical and spiritual epitome of humanity.

Benefit: You increase two ability scores of your choice by 2 each.

Level 24: Unquenchable Spirit

You are the soul of the empire. Mere physical death cannot put an end to what you have created—or what you have become.

Benefit: Once per day when you start your turn at 0 hit points or fewer, you regain hit points equal to your bloodied value.

Level 26: The Sovereign Will

You speak with the authority of a god. All harken to your every word, and to the words of those you hold closest.

The Sovereign Will God-Emperor Utility 26

Your commanding presence radiates from you to grant authority to your companions.

Encounter ✦ Aura
Minor Action **Personal**

Effect: You activate an aura 2 that lasts until the end of your next turn. When you or any ally in the aura makes a Diplomacy or an Intimidate check, instead of rolling a d20, resolve the check as if that character had rolled a 20.

Level 30: Your Protective Wing

Your awareness and guiding hand extend to all who follow you. No enemy will despoil any who fall in your service; you return them to your side where they can be healed, or at least buried with honor.

Benefit: When any ally you can see drops to 0 hit points or fewer, you can teleport that ally to a square adjacent to you as a free action.

About the Author

Jeff Tidball is an award-winning writer and game designer with a roiling wake of stories, board games, card games, and roleplaying games in his rearview mirror. Marquee credits include the *Horus Heresy* board game, the *Pieces of Eight* pirate coin combat game, and the book *Things We Think About Games*. Jeff holds an MFA in screenwriting from the University of Southern California and recently moved to Kansas City to become the CEO of RiverKey Creative, an animation, video production, and interactive design firm. His website is jefftidball.com, and he spews forth on Twitter as @jefftidball.

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The Long Shadow of D&D

D&D Alumni

James Maliszewski

W e've announced the upcoming limited-edition reprints of the original 1st Edition core rulebooks: Monster Manual, Player's Handbook, and Dungeon Master's Guide (the purchase of which help support the Gygax Memorial Fund). To better discuss the importance of these books for the game—and for the entire hobby—Grognardia.com's James Maliszewski returns for this installment of D&D Alumni.

The hobby of roleplaying games was publicly born with the appearance of three little brown booklets in early 1974. These three booklets, entitled *Men & Magic*, *Monsters & Treasure*, and *The Underworld & Wilderness Adventures*, comprised what is now often called *Original Dungeons & Dragons* (or OD&D), but which at the time was simply known as *Dungeons & Dragons*. The adjective "original" is appended to the title to distinguish it from *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, a revision and expansion of the 1974 game, which made its formal debut in 1977 with the publication of the *Monster Manual*.

In his foreword to the *Monster Manual*, dated September 27, 1977, editor Mike Carr calls the book "a 'first' in the gaming world" because of "its special hard cover." Difficult as it might be to believe, given the ubiquity of modern roleplaying games with hardcover rulebooks, AD&D was a first in this regard. Indeed, for many years, it was the *only* example of a roleplaying game presented in this fashion. Equally remarkable was the fact that AD&D's complete rules were spread over three different volumes, in some ways mirroring the presentation of OD&D, albeit in a greatly expanded form. This presentation not only confirmed the place of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* as the most popular RPG of its day but also established it as a top quality one.

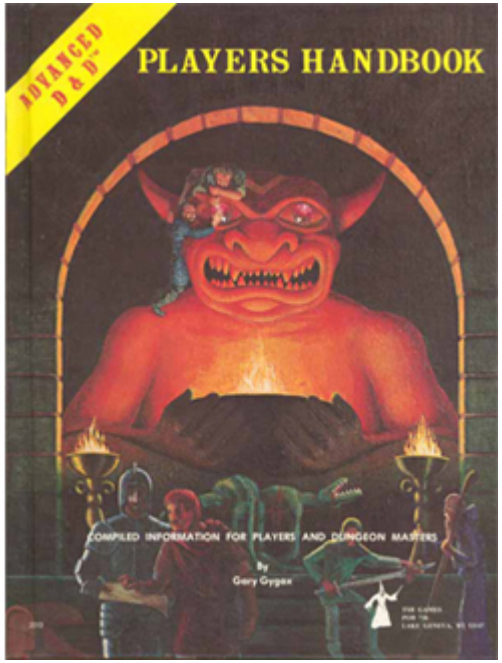
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS
Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures
GYGAX & ARNESON
MEN & MAGIC
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS
Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures
GYGAX & ARNESON
MONSTERS & TREASURE

Mike Carr uses those very words in his foreword, when he says that the *Monster Manual*'s hardcover is "another step in our continuing quest for top

quality products." Speaking as a proud owner of those three rulebooks, I can fully attest to the sturdiness of their textbook-quality binding. More than three decades after I originally purchased them, not a single page is loose and their covers have withstood the punishments dished out by being carried in many a backpack over their lifetime. Also noteworthy is the fact that AD&D's adoption of a hardcover format was at least partially due to the needs of being distributed to bookstores, where they could be displayed just like any other book. This move not only marked a major change in the way the game presented itself but also made it more widely available beyond the toy and hobby shops where OD&D had been sold.

Advancing Dungeons & Dragons

The AD&D project was a massive undertaking that began in 1976, as E. Gary Gygax, co-creator of D&D, set to work producing what was originally imagined to be a clarification of OD&D, but which soon became much more than that. In his preface to the 1978 *Players Handbook*, Gygax states that it "was a project which involved varying degrees of my thought, imagination, and actual working time over a period of more than a year and one-half." He goes on to say that this endeavor consisted of "put[ting] into these works what should be the important parts of a superior D&D campaign, cutting out material which actually adds little or nothing to the game, revising the old, and adding and expanding in the essential areas."



The three hardcover volumes of AD&D—in order: *Monster Manual*, *Players Handbook*, and *Dungeon Masters Guide*—appeared at a rate of one per year between 1977 and 1979. During that time, AD&D co-existed with OD&D. In fact, AD&D depended on OD&D's continued existence, since, until the release of the *Dungeon Masters Guide*, important rules of the game—such as experience awards and magic items, to name just two—were unavailable except through the pages of OD&D. Though both versions of the game continued to exist side by side, the appearance of the *Dungeon Masters Guide* brought about a shift in the relationship between the two. Gygax, writing in issue #13 of *The Dragon* (June 1979), stated unequivocally that AD&D was a "different game" than OD&D.

In the same article, Gary Gygax adds that "there is no similarity (perhaps even less) between D&D and AD&D than there is between D&D and its various imitators produced by competing publishers." How could he say this, when it seems so obvious how much AD&D owes to OD&D? I used to think his position was patently absurd for this very reason, but Gygax does give us some clues as to what he was thinking. For

example, he says that he believed the target audience of OD&D "was principally the same as that of historical wargames in general and military miniatures in particular." The explosive popularity of the game proved him wrong in this belief, which is why AD&D would be written in such a way as to be appeal to a "broad audience of hundreds of thousands of people—wargamers, game hobbyists, science fiction and fantasy fans, those who have never read fantasy fiction or played strategy games, young and old, male and female."

Consequently, it was AD&D that became the standard bearer for *Dungeons & Dragons* in the broader public consciousness. For instance, the *New York Times* best-selling *Dragonlance* fantasy novels were based on a series of adventure modules written for AD&D. Likewise, the covers of AD&D rulebooks, in particular David Trampier's *Players Handbook* and David Sutherland's *Dungeon Masters Guide* covers, became iconic representations of D&D in the minds of even those who never played the game during the days when those rulebooks were available. These three rulebooks (and the game system they presented) became the public face of both *Dungeons & Dragons* and the wider hobby of roleplaying, which was rapidly becoming a runaway fad at the time.

In retrospect, this popularity is hardly surprising. The AD&D books were not only physically impressive, as I noted earlier, but their content was similarly majestic. Better organized and presented than OD&D, with tables of contents, indexes, and glossaries, they were widely seen as vast improvements over their predecessor. Likewise, Gary Gygax's sesquipedalian writing style elevated their texts above mere game books, in the process sending a whole generation of gamers scurrying to their dictionaries to look up words such as "milieu," "dweomer," and "puissant,"—not to mention Latin abbreviations, such as e.g., i.e, and q.v.—to cite just a few examples I still remember to this day. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* might have been a game, but its rulebooks were written and presented in a way unlike any other game before or since, which likely goes a long way toward explaining why, even now, this game remains so highly regarded and fondly remembered.

About the Author

James Maliszewski started roleplaying in the late fall of 1979, when he opened up a copy of the *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set*, which was edited by Dr. J. Eric Holmes and originally purchased for his father. More than thirty years later, he's still playing. He works as a freelance writer and blogs about old school gaming at http://grognardia.blogspot.com.

TSR: This Stuff Rocks!

By Shelly Mazzanoble

Illustration by William O'Connor

"What's . . . that?" I asked Laura, my boss, pointing to what looked like a discarded prop from *Poltergeist*.

She laughed. "I know, right! It's from the TSR archives. They actually sold these."

Okay, that was funny. There before me was a Zarak the Half Orc Halloween costume complete with a plastic, death-trap face mask with eye slots as tiny as pennies. Kids these days will never know what it was like to sacrifice your peripheral vision and practically be suffocated by your own breath behind one of those putrid plastic faces.

The box before us held even more treats.

"Oh, wow," I said, pulling out party hats, cake toppers, napkins, and invitations. "I think I just found the theme for Bart's next birthday party."

And it got better—puzzle books, rub-off transfers, even a sleeping bag! I couldn't believe TSR made all this stuff and, more than that, couldn't believe they ever stopped! This stuff was legend. I mean, I'd heard it existed, but here it was in the plastic, highly flammable flesh.

"Do you guys remember this stuff?" Laura asked Chris and Chuck, who have been D&D players since the early 80s.

I held up a *Realms of Wonder* calendar from 1984.

"I had that," Chris said.

"I wanted that," Chuck said, pointing to a D&D maze puzzle. Soon he and Chris were going through the boxes, waxing on about their old products and memories. Just watching them was nearly as sweet as watching one of those YouTube videos of a dog greeting his owner who just got back from Afghanistan.

"These were awesome," Chuck said, pulling out the D&D Shrinky Dinks. *D&D Shrinky Dinks*!

"I used to do these paint by numbers," Chris said. "And give them away as gifts."

Okay, that was sweeter than a happy dog video. Too bad they didn't have Etsy back then.

"Could I commission you to paint the Menzoberranzan skyline in pastel watercolors?" I asked.

His answer was a highlighter bounced off my right temple. (I get most of my office supplies this way.)

As it turned out, there was a lot more of this stuff. Apparently it all came from a warehouse in Wisconsin where TSR kept its archives. Recently we had it all sent here and, well, let's just say . . . wow. People, within those walls were miles and miles of D&D memories from the 70s, 80s, and 90s. Books, magazines, minis, action figures, and computer and analog games. The items at my desk barely scratched the surface of what other boxes around the rest of the office held. Laura and I were contemplating all the cool things we could do with these relics when Bart came rushing by all aflutter.

"A shambling mound!" he screamed. "There's a shambling mound down there!"

"Are you being chased?" I asked, admittedly a little peeved that he would lead whatever was chasing him right to me.

"It's from the warehouse," he explained. "I haven't seen that thing since I was a little kid. He was my

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favorite. I remember getting it for Christmas and bringing it over to Jordy's house the next day so we could play with it. Everyone wanted a shambling mound."

I laughed thinking of Bart's sweet father going into Toys 'R Us trying to locate this mysterious toy of his son's dreams.

"That's awesome," Laura said, winking at me. "I'm sure that will fit right into your décor."

Really, I haven't seen Bart that excited since . . . well, ever. Not when my dad gave him a signed Brian Urlacher football for Christmas. Not when he got into grad school. Not even when he saw me coming down the aisle at our wedding.

"It's not just a shambling mound," Bart explained. "It's the shambling mound *with treasure sack*."

"Oh, well, that makes more sense now."

"*I need that shambling mound*."

Bart was starting to scare us.

Now, there is a plan for a large chunk of this treasure trove, and you'll find out about that soon. But as for the duplicates, well, R&D had other ideas. Apparently later that day, anyone who wanted to add these little gems to their home collections could enter their name into a draft. At a designated time, they'd run down the order, taking turns picking until everything was spoken for. This had "awesome" written all over it.

A few days later, I started noticing a lot of new things on coworkers' desks. Old issues of *Dragon*, 1st Edition adventures that had never been cracked open, 3-D puzzles. Bart got his shambling mound, and thankfully it was hanging on his cubicle wall and not on our living room wall. If Bart was so happy to have acquired this blast from his past, certainly others felt the same way. I headed down to R&D to find out what everyone else got and why. If I didn't have any prized childhood artifacts from my youth, surely I could live vicariously through my coworkers.

It was hard to tell if anything on the desks of these guys is new, considering there are always boxes of games and stacks of books scattered everywhere on the third floor. But there was definitely something new on game designer Peter Lee's desk, and he was all too happy to tell me about the best part of his haul.

"Easy," he said, pulling out a pristine copy of the First Edition *Fiend Folio*.

I had seen a much-loved, busted-spine, root-beer-stained copy of this book once when someone brought it in for reference. But this one looked so shiny and new that it was hard to believe that, if it was a person, it would just about be old enough to run for president. More interestingly, I had never seen Peter so blissed out. He literally hugged his copy of *Fiend Folio* to his chest like I have been known to cuddle a new pair of shoes or a flourless chocolate torte.

"Umm, I kind of feel like I'm interrupting something here," I said, wishing I had brought a camera.

"I first saw this book when I was seven years old," he said.

"Seven? Oh, no. You were much too young for a book like this! I wasn't even old enough for Judy Blume when I was seven!"

"Oh, I was already playing D&D by then," he explained.

He and his brother rode their bikes to a game shop that had just opened in a suburban Minnesota strip mall. He already owned the First Edition core rulebooks, but when he saw this book on the shelf, he knew he had to have it. Granted, I was never a seven-year-old boy, but I guess I could see the irresistible allure of a githyanki staring out at me. My friend's seven-year-old boy is so fascinated by road kill I'm seriously considering getting him the taxidermied jackalope I saw in an antique shop the other day.

"But I couldn't afford it," Peter said, breaking my heart.

I waited for him to get to the part where he asked his mom for a year's advance on his allowance, or a favorite uncle surprised him with it for his birthday, or perhaps he got tired of waiting and shoplifted it. Whatever. I'm not one to judge. (God forgive me, I stole Madonna lace gloves from Tops 'N Bottoms when I was in seventh grade and have been trying to pay my debt to retail ever since.)

But the payoff never came.

"That was the last time I saw this book," he said, gazing at its cover the way Bart looked at his shambling mound.

"Wait," I said. "You never got the book? Until *now*?"

"Nope. I mean, I could have scoured eBay for a copy, but it probably wouldn't have been in this good condition."

"And because you knew the Universe would bring you one when you were ready."

"Umm . . . yeah. Something like that."

My next stop was the desk of Mike Mearls, which—surprise!—he was actually sitting at.

"All right, Mearls, surrender the loot."

He was eager to oblige, hoisting box upon box onto the circular table near his cubicle.

"Oh, you'll like this," he said, handing me the second greatest SPI roleplaying game of all time—*Dallas*. "They had *All My Children*, too. Should I have snagged that for you?"

"Why would you assume *I* would want a copy of that game?"

"I just . . . I mean, you're so—"

"When I already have one!" It's true. My mom gave it to my brother and me for Easter one year.

Mike scored scads more boxed sets, to add to his growing collection.

"At home?" I asked. "Your wife is cool with this?"

"Well, it's staying here. For now."

He also acquired three issues of *Dungeon* magazine, which hold a lot of significance to him.

"These were the first issues of *Dungeon* I ever bought," he said wistfully. "I still remember playing the adventures in them."

Okay, that's a pretty sweet payoff. I can only imagine what it would be like for tween Shelly to grow up and write for *Tiger Beat* or *Bop* magazine.

The highlight of Mearls's haul might have been the boxes of miniatures he wasn't allowed to have as a kid.

"Because they're lead-based?" I asked. "Or because this box is simply called *Females*?"

"I don't know," he said. "My parents were cool with the other stuff. They just drew the line at minis. In fact, don't use my real name. I don't want them to know I have them."

We all had aspirations when we were kids. Mine was to be a waitress at Friendly's. Mike's was to own everything in the 1981 Gateway to Adventure catalog from TSR. (I later Googled that catalog, and all I have to say is . . . OMG! Mike's poor wife!)

"After going through these archives, I'm just one board game away from completion."

(That would be *Warlocks & Wizards*, in case anyone wants to help him out.)

Here's a bit of trivia for you. The runaway star of the whole lot was *not* the Dracolich jigsaw puzzle (cool as it was) or the TSR Members Only-esque jacket. It was the D&D coloring albums.

"Oh, yeah, there was a fad back in the late 70s," Stan! (a D&D producer) shared with me. "Older kids were totally into these books. These were definitely not for the younger set."

I found that hard to believe until I flipped open to a page depicting a horse seemingly being decapitated. Right. Definitely not for the kids. Unless that kid happened to be Stan!

"This was the first D&D product I ever owned," he said proudly. "I played D&D at camp and couldn't wait to go home and play again. But the only product I could find was a coloring album."

That's certainly changed for Stan! who probably has the most robust D&D collection of anyone in the building. Because of that, he went for more obscure and rare items like the *Boot Hill* 1st Edition boxed set (his first pick) and the *Bullwinkle and Rocky Role-Playing Party Game*.

"It's got hand puppets and everything." he said. "But I don't think I'll be able to get anyone to play with me."

"Umm, wrong," I said. "You had me at Bullwinkle."

That made Stan! smile, but not because I'm inviting myself over to play Bullwinkle hand puppets with him. This stuff has staying power.

On my way back to the fourth floor, I kept thinking about how cool it must be for those guys to get a sneak peek back to their childhoods. I couldn't help but wish I had discovered D&D sooner. I wouldn't have swapped bugbears for teddy bears, but I'm sure we all could have coexisted.

When I got back to my desk, I found a surprise.

"Kevin!" I squealed, hugging my brand-new, thirty-year-old *Minotaur of the Maze* action figure.

"I traded my *Bullywugs of the Bog* for it," Bart said. "I thought you could add it to your collection."

He pointed to the collection of Kevins on my shelf. There were at least six of them lined up next to my other collection of beholders. I have lots of minis and foam swords, and dog-eared copies of sourcebooks. I keep every character sheet I ever played and officially have more dice than shoes. I hung "new Kevin," still in his box, right between the photo of Lolth and me from PAX East and the drawing Ralph Horsley did of Tabitha's old familiar, Oso de la Fez.

It turns out I *do* have a lot of cool D&D memories. Just looking at all this stuff made me feel warm and fuzzy. Why wait thirty years to have that sentiment when you can have it now?

About the Author

Shelly Mazzanoble just ordered three new pairs of shoes online she so no longer has more dice than shoes.

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FORGOTTEN REALMS®

Ed Greenwood's Eye on the Realms

The Storm Bird

By Ed Greenwood

Illustration by Noah Bradley

The residents of Sword Coast ports are accustomed to putting their heads down and riding out lashing storms from time to time, but they seldom have to contend with skyships (of the sort once common in fabled Halruaa and now flown more rarely by the Five Companies) hurtling overhead during such weather. Yet in the last three successive storms, a hitherto unknown skyship clearly lettered *The Storm Bird* has crashed through rooftops and chimneys in Waterdeep, fighting the storm to reach some destination in the city. Various witnesses have reported seeing goods dropped on lines—and bound, hooded people drawn up to the ship on those same lines. The skyship crew members look human, but they wear full-head hoods with tentacles that make them resemble mind flayers. Why? Who are they, and what are they up to? Where does the ship come from and go to? And why do the Masked Lords refuse to say a word about it?

Haldark's Tale

Two months ago, what is likely the second appearance of *The Storm Bird* in Waterdeep was witnessed by many inhabitants of Castle Ward, South Ward, Trades Ward, and Dock Ward. The most extensive account of that night's sightings of the skyship was given by one Aldran Haldark, in the widely popular but "insolent"[1] broadsheet known as *Horkle's Gossip Cauldron*, which is published by Annath Horkle of Beacon Street, Trades Ward.

Haldark, a guilded rope maker and ship outfitter, is also the owner and proprietor of Haldark's Shiphaven Shop of Sternpost Street, Dock Ward. He is an amiable, generally trustworthy man who has paid his taxes and maintained his guild standing without remark or incident for over twenty years (since founding the Shiphaven at the age of twenty-one). Some decry his skyship tale as "utter drunken fancy"[2] or "so wildly inventive as to be the ravings of a madman—or a penniless lout willing to say anything to get paid for his tongue-waggings,"[3] but over forty other accounts, from as many sources in the four southerly wards of the city, support most of his story.

According to Haldark, *The Storm Bird* appeared out of the north "at the height of the howling, lashing rain," scudding south in the lee of Mount Waterdeep under storm-rigged (very light) sail. As it lost the shelter of the mountain, it descended sharply in an effort to avoid being swept inland and missing the city altogether. It was heading, he judged, for somewhere along Ship Street, but the vessel encountered

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difficulties owing to the fierce gusts of the storm, striking the roofs of several warehouses along Pressbow Lane before hurling and hooking grapnels among balconies and chimneys west of there. Thence, by hurling lines and winching them, "rather as a man climbs a mountain," the skyship was hauled laboriously westward, against the gale, to hang above the curving south end of Ship Street. The stability thus gained was short-lived, since "the storm fury commenced to claw at where those lines were anchored on the ship and where they were snagged among the buildings, one by one tearing free of both." That short time saw "frantic activity on the part of the skyship crew," who busily let down lines bearing "various crates and casks" into Ship Street. Then recipients that Haldark could not see (owing to his vantage point at the window of a friend's upper room in Shrimp Alley) evidently replaced the cargo with bound and hooded humans—because that's what was on the lines when they were drawn up again.

During this loading, quickening storm winds turned the ship and heeled it sharply over, enabling Haldark to read the name on its bow and get "a mothering good look" at some of the crew, all of whom wore cloth hoods with stuffed cloth tentacles sewn onto them at the chins. "Mind flayer masks," Haldark termed these, "of a sort I've seen only once before in all my days—and that was a cruder affair, worn by a noble to a feast, and there spurned as being in the worst of taste, as I recall."[4] He believes the masks were worn to conceal the identities of the crew (there are dozens of Sword Coast ships known as *The Storm Bird*, but not one of them is a skyship), but as to why the likeness of an illithid was chosen, he can only hazard a guess that it represents a hitherto-unknown secret society. "They'd need to keep secret, wouldn't they?" Haldark asked Horkle. "Being as they were working with slavers and all!"

Some citizens have taken fierce issue with the conclusion that the skyship was dealing in slaves or kidnap victims, but these people are the same vocal critics who dismiss Haldark's tale as fanciful. Those who believe him have a hard time putting forward any other explanations for the ship hauling up living but trussed persons. (Haldark swears he saw some of the hoisted persons struggling "or at least twitching and bending" as they were hauled aloft in the storm winds.)

Most of the city reacted with fear. Who might be taken next? Why are they being taken? And who are these tentacle-masked kidnappers of the air? Many colorful claims have been made as to the identities of the masked skysailors, from members of the Dungsweepers' Guild (who infamously wore squid masks about a century ago to vote anonymously against a hated and tyrannical guildmaster) to real illithids wearing masks to make observers believe they are humans in disguise. Few of these claims, however, are anything more than unsupported speculation.

The visit described so vividly by Haldark is held to be the second Waterdhavian voyage of the skyship. Some Dock Ward citizens claim to have seen "a ship sailing among the warehouse peaks and wharfjets[5] around Snail Street" (in Dock Ward) during a fierce predawn storm about four tendays earlier. Their stories were dismissed at the time as drunkards' talk, but most Waterdhavians now believe they witnessed the first arrival of *The Storm Bird* in the city.

Jhannastra's Testimony

In the wake of the publication of Haldark's account of his skyship sighting, a "quietcloak"[6] wealthy widow of Castle Ward, one Laeyra Jhannastra, sought out Annath Horkle and told him about her deceased husband, Olthar Jhannastra. It seems that Olthar, a dealer in fineweave textiles and an investor in many outland mercantile concerns, had some investments (details unknown to his widow) concerning *The Storm Bird*. The records she had found seemed to be written in some sort of code except for his name, the ship's name, and someone called "Faerlen of the Gate," whom she took to be a merchant of Baldur's Gate. She didn't know how to decipher the records or what to do about them, so she did nothing.

Horkle published a brief account of what she told him. The very night that issue of the *Cauldron* appeared, the Jhannastra house was broken into, the widow struck senseless by multiple assailants she never got a good look at, and almost every written record and book in her home carried off. This attack so frightened her that she has since had her home rebuilt into a near-fortress, with stout metal shutters fitted over the windows and various traps put on the outer doors that lead to the floors she occupies, and she seldom ventures forth.[7] Thus far, the Watch has described the robbery only as "baffling."

Their assessment is scant consolation to the widow, who obviously lives in fear—particularly since a certain word was found one morning scratched into all of her exterior doors: "Raedro." The word is Old Common for "What we seek is in here."

Malaver's Investigation

At least one claim as to the identities of the tentacle-masked sailors is supported by more than mere speculation, thanks to the man known most widely in the city as the Black Glove.

Over a dozen independent, unguilded investigators for hire are currently active in Waterdeep. One of the most famous (thanks to his successes[8]) is an agile, brusque man by the name of Awntrus "Black Glove" Malaver. On his own whim, rather than for a client, he has undertaken what he calls "certain inquiries" to uncover any organization or group in western Faerûn that might be known to wear mind flayer masks.

Malaver prefers to keep his methods of investigation mysterious. He maintained this habit while looking into the matter of the masks, but it's known that he recently traveled to Neverwinter and Baldur's Gate, and twice to Scornubel. (He often works on multiple investigations at once, so the reasons for these visits might not relate to tentacle-masked men at all.) It's not known whom Malaver consulted with during his investigations, but a handful of days ago he abruptly gave an interview to Annath Horkle (forthwith published in the *Cauldron*) in which he announced that—due to increasingly frequent attempts on his life—he was abandoning all efforts to learn anything about the wearers of tentacle masks.

Malaver's published words reveal that, before he quit, he had uncovered three sources that relate accounts of such masks. The first is a possibly defunct Calishite courtesans' guild that uses (or used) mind flayer masks to conceal members' identities during certain festive occasions and guild votes. The second is a troupe of actors known as Oodren's Players, led by a triumvirate of men who all wore tentacled masks in public and called themselves "Oodren" so as to maintain contractual control of the troupe after the death of its founder, Oodren, a gifted thespian who often wore a tentacled mask as a memento of what he considered his greatest role. The third is a Red Wizard of Thay, believed to have been blasted to ashes in a spell-duel more than a century ago, who called himself "Hornrar" and wore a tentacled mask to frighten the commoners of the Heartlands with whom he negotiated trade matters.

Malaver believed that none of these mask-wearers are connected with the crew of the skyship, who are "dangerous" and "hostile" toward anyone seeking to learn more about them. The attempts on his life were interfering so much with his career, the investigator added, that he was "heartily willing, nay, eager" to forever abandon all interest in tentacled masks if doing so would end the attempted assassinations—"hopefully before they end me."

Horkle concluded the *Cauldron*'s published account with his own belief that Malaver had learned far more about the skyship crew than he was willing to share, an opinion evidently held by most Waterdhavians gossiping in city taverns.

For his part, Malaver has declined further interviews, abandoned his customary rooms, and taken to sleeping in many places around the city. He now uses disguises daily and has begun meeting clients by paying innkeepers and tavernmasters to convey messages and arrange meetings in an ever-changing sequence of inn rooms. He has been silent regarding whether the attempts on his life have continued, but he has loudly denied any connection with a recent anonymous chapbook titled *Beware the Favored Tentacle*.

The Favored Tentacle

No one knows who penned or printed the short, poorly lettered, "cheap-scratch" (printed on low-quality paper) chapbooks that have appeared throughout Waterdeep south of the Palace in the last few days, dropped on doorsteps and found on taproom floors beneath the tables. The mystery author writes in short, emphatic sentences in Common, advancing a warning to all readers that the cities of the Sword Coast are being menaced by a "small but powerful group of ruthless moneyseekers who disdain all ruling authorities" and are in league with, or possibly led by, a handful of mind flayers that conceal their true natures behind tentacle masks. The illithids also provide identical masks that all other members of their cabal, the Favored Tentacle, must wear whenever they meet with fellow Favored. In this way, no one will know the face of another member, so no one can betray a fellow Favored. Of course, the chapbook writer points out, "No man can tell that behind the mask is a fell monster, not another man."

The chapbook claims that the Favored Tentacle is patiently removing individuals who know too much about the cabal or who are too capable to be coerced or tricked when the group tightens its dominance over Sword Coast cities. These people are the victims being snatched by *The Storm Bird*, and they are doomed to die horribly as the mind flayers feed. "Beware, whenever and wherever you see the symbol of a circle divided vertically by a wavy line," the chapbook warns, "for by this sign, the Favored know one another, guide one another, and instruct one another."

The chapbook also asserts that "Their patience is their great strength," and "They use the weather and night and misdirection—the framing of innocents—as their cover. They use no magic except enchanted things they carry, which hide them from the lesser magics of priests and wizards."

All this talk might be fiction, or it might be true. Waterdhavians know enough to be upset, and they spread wild gossip as they talk this over and over . . . but they haven't done much else. Yet.

More than a score of Favored symbols have appeared on doors and alley walls all over the city, but it's not known how many of these are the work of malicious pranksters. The Watch is investigating, but the announcement of their involvement has prompted many a cynical citizen to comment, "They are investigating? The gods help us all."

Notes

1. In the stated opinion of many Masked Lords of Waterdeep, a judgment echoed by scores of senior Watch officers and palace officials. Horkle's prose is colorful, often profane, and blunt to the point of rudeness. The *Cauldron* doubtless indulges in embellishment and even wholesale invention when reporting on the words and deeds of public figures it

dislikes (most guildmasters and elder nobility), but its candor in other matters is treasured by many readers.

2. These are the words of Maruttur "Mutter" Thalekin, self-appointed Sage of the Seas. A Castle Ward seller of maps, charts, and books, Mutter is widely known for his expertise regarding recent (within the last century) human seafaring activity in the vicinity of Waterdeep. He claims to know nothing of Skullport and the Seacaves, cleaving to "aboveboard" ships, mariners, and sailings. His nickname comes from his soft voice and his habit of talking aloud to himself almost constantly. Mutter is a small, hunched, balding, bespectacled man with a long, narrow, curly red beard that comes to a point.

3. So said Ithrim Cauldart, Purveyor to the Titled. A caterer and procurer used by most city nobility, the rotund, pompous, and fussy Cauldart has in the last decade or so drifted into a sideline business. For fees, he announces the views, opinions, judgments, and desires of noble clients, acting as the "voice of the nobles" so they need not make public utterances they would prefer to avoid.

4. Haldark recalls correctly (though he wasn't a guest at the occasion and was recalling only the gossip that reached the south end of the city). Such a mask was made by the servants of young Lord Quaen Lanngolyn for him to wear to a masked feast and revel hosted by the Silmerhelve noble family in the summer of 1466 DR. Lord Olranth Silmerhelve judged the mask to be "in the worst of taste" and turned Lord Lanngolyn from the door, refusing him entry until the popular young lordling could present himself in "something more in keeping." This he promptly did, returning in a mask that was a caricature of the old dowager harridan Lady Anthra Snome—whereupon he was jovially admitted, despite the fact that the real Lady Snome was present at the revel and was volubly and demonstrably "far less than amused!"

5. Wharfjets are small, movable cranes used on the city docks to load and unload ships. Most of them are ungainly, constantly repaired constructions that in our real world would be called simple quarry cranes. Each consists of an upright spar or pole that supports, by means of chains, a boom thrusting out at a forty-five-degree angle. From the tip of this boom descends the crane rope, which ends in hooks that lift nets slung around cargo and then pivot to let the loads down into the backs of waiting wagons. The wharfjets are mounted on double-width, double-length wagons of massive construction that are usually loaded with stones to keep the cranes from toppling over when lifting heavy cargo. Rather than move along the streets while working, most jets are sited and raised on wooden pillars by means of wedges (and gangs of sweating, swearing Watermen—the guild that loads and unloads ships in the city harbor—who drive the wedges home) that lift the stone-laden wagons just off their wheels. Most wharfjets have spars and booms made of multiple timbers lashed together, and when in use, they are stabilized by guylines run from the top of the spar in all directions to pulleys and tie-downs mounted on outlier wagons, which are spaced out to the sides of the jets.

6. "Quietcloak" is a Sword Coast term for someone of low public profile who habitually keeps his or her own counsel rather than gossiping. "A listener rather than a talker," as the local saying goes.

7. Laeyra Jhannastra's resources come from her late husband's investments, which she liquidates as she needs funds, and from the rents of three ground-floor shops beneath her living quarters. Since the robbery, these rents have been collected for her by Rhoenus Ravenwynd, a factor (trade agent) of Ravenwyndar Representations, of Blackmul Street in Trades Ward. He invests them with a moneylender (Saerpryn "Old Coldeyes" Thulomhreigh, of Rainrun Street in Castle Ward), who pays the widow's bills out of her earnings.

8. "Successes" meaning occasions upon which he has learned things that led to the solution of mysteries that baffled the Watch—who, as a result, regard him with wary respect (particularly since covert Watchful Order spellcastings suggested that Malaver wasn't using trickery or foreknowledge of real crimes to succeed where the Watch had failed). The man is rude (especially to nobility and authority), energetic, and brilliant, and he claims to have flashes of "visions sent by the gods" on rare and brief occasions. Regardless, he is very good at what he does.

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the Forgotten Realms® setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, plus he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.

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DARK·SUN CAMPAIGN SETTING

Eye on Dark Sun

Tsochar

By Rodney Thompson

Illustration by Goran Josic

In a world where powerful defilers rule over their populaces with an iron fist, more subtle dangers can go unnoticed. This tendency to focus on the power of the sorcerer-kings has allowed a hidden threat to grow in power and influence, all without arousing the suspicions of even the most vigilant defenders of the people. This threat is known as the tsochar, a species of parasitic creatures that take over the bodies and minds of their hosts, asserting their will in the place of an unsuspecting victim.

Imagine looking into the eyes of an ally and never being sure whether you're looking at your ally or at someone whose will has been usurped by an ancient and malicious being. That creature wears your ally's flesh like you wear clothes, pulling off a deception so thorough that friends and family members can tell no difference. Imagine fighting side by side with someone you have known for years—someone broke out of a slave pit with you—only to suspect that the person's mind has been replaced by an alien evil. This horror is what it is like to encounter the tsochar.

Tsochar (*The Book of Vile Darkness*, pages 65–67) are tentacle creatures that enter the body of a host and attach themselves to the mind of the victim. Once so attached, the tsochar has full access to all of the memories and thoughts of the host, as well as total control over the host's body. The host's will is completely suppressed, and the tsochar becomes the new personality in charge of that body. This connection is so thorough that detecting the presence of tsochar infestation is almost impossible; the tsochar gains a +10 bonus to all checks made to pull off the impersonation, and no outward visual indicators reveal that the tsochar has infested the host's body.

Tsochar of Athas

Tsochar of Athas date back to ancient times, long before the discovery of defiling magic and the rise of the sorcerer-kings. In this distant past, the tsochar were banished or fled to the deep, dark places of the world, falling into a slumber that preserved their physical forms. These tsochar buried themselves in lightless chasms, hid in subterranean caverns, and hibernated in the darkest corners of long-abandoned cisterns and wells. For eons they slept, and their existence was forgotten.

The rise of the sorcerer-kings also coincided with an increase in both the volume and potency

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of psionic power across Athas. Since the sorcerer-kings are themselves masters of psionic power, the most powerful beings on the planet began giving off waves of psionic energy, which reached these dark recesses of the world. The tsochar awakened, the lure of psionic energy causing them to stir from their self-imposed exile and creep toward the surface once more. Upon their emergence, the tsochar found the world much changed, and they quickly began seizing new host bodies.

Even now, some tsochar have not yet awoken from their millennial slumber. Adventurers bold enough to delve into forgotten structures or explore the ruins of cities long buried in the sand can sometimes awaken tsochar—not that anyone outside of those expeditions ever notices. Though most Athasian tsochar are solitary, in some rare cases a band of adventurers uncovers a small nest of tsochar that seizes control of each member of the expedition. A group of explorers heads into the ruins as a band of adventurers, then emerges as a group of mobile hosts for parasites so ancient that even the sorcerer-kings have no knowledge of their existence.

Indeed, the awakening of tsochar in recent years takes advantage of the ignorance about them. Many of the eldest tsochar have made it their goal to infest a sorcerer-king. Getting close to a sorcerer-king is no mean feat; many sorcerer-kings are reclusive and paranoid, and they have guards and wards in place to prevent their enemies from infecting them with maladies (the same wards which, conveniently, keep the tsochar at bay). Perhaps more relevant is the fact that the sorcerer-kings are so powerful that, even if a tsochar got close enough, it could not seize the ruler's psyche quickly enough to prevent the inevitable counterattack. Still, the tsochar are persistent, and at least a few of them have wormed a way into the ranks of the templars of various city-states.

Tsochar of modern Athas have adapted to the new world into which they have emerged. The abundance of psionic power has worked so far to the tsochar's advantage. When a tsochar infests a creature with psionic talent (latent or otherwise), something about the bond between the tsochar and the host breaks through subconscious barriers in the mind of the psion, effectively magnifying the host's psionic might. For this reason, tsochar are most aggressive in their pursuit of those Athasians who have cultivated psionic talent, since both tsochar and host grow more powerful as a result of the bond. The tsochar also possess some basic defenses against psionic attacks, creating an unpleasant surprise during a psychic duel for an opponent unaware of the tsochar's presence.

Not all aspects of modern Athas are as beneficial to the tsochar. The presence of defiling magic is an obstacle for them, since defiling weakens the life force of potential hosts. Tsochar who infest defilers find that their host rots from within once the infestation has taken root. A tsochar in a defiler host is also afflicted by a hunger, which in turn leads the tsochar to behave recklessly. To the outside observer, a tsochar-infested defiler appears not only to go mad, but also to become gluttonous while wasting away as though starving to death. Tsochar rarely stay in defiler hosts for long. They only willingly choose a defiler as a host when no other option exists, or when the tsochar needs to infest that particular host for a short period of time. As a result, those tsochar who have taken templars as hosts choose templars who show no predilection for defiling, and instead pick those who possess psionic might.

Creating an Athasian Tsochar

When creating an Athasian tsochar, use the higher of the tsochar parasite's (*The Book of Vile Darkness*, page 65) or the infested humanoid's mental ability scores. The new creature has the parasite's alignment, and the parasite's languages are added to the host's. Then, add the traits and power below.

Traits

Psychic Scream (psychic) ✦ **Aura** 1
Enemies in the aura take 5 psychic damage whenever the tsochar takes psychic damage.
Level 11: 10 psychic damage.
Level 21: 15 psychic damage.

Parasitic Mind
At the start of its turn, the tsochar makes saving throws to end any stunning or dominating effect on it, including effects that don't normally end on a save.

Triggered Actions

Infestation Unveiled ✦ **Encounter**
Trigger: An attack that does not deal psychic damage drops the tsochar below 1 hit point.
Effect (No Action): A tsochar parasite appears in the tsochar's space or the nearest unoccupied space.

Athasian Tsochar Psionics

As with most creatures of Athas, tsochar of the burned world possess psychic powers. Although you can add any psionic power that fits your needs, the following powers can be added to a tsochar-infested humanoid to impart basic psionic capability.

Standard Actions

Ego Whip (psychic) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Ranged 10 (one creature); the tsochar's level + 3 vs. Will
Hit: 2d8 + the tsochar's level psychic damage.

Triggered Actions

Psionic Boost (psychic) ✦ **Recharge** ⚄ ⚅
Trigger: The tsochar hits a target with an at-will attack power that deals psychic damage.
Effect (Free Action): The target takes extra psychic damage equal to 1d8 + one-half the tsochar's level.

About the Author

Rodney Thompson is an advanced designer for Dungeons & Dragons® R&D at Wizards of the Coast, originally from Chattanooga, Tennessee. His credits for the D&D® game include the *Dark Sun® Campaign Setting* and the *Dark Sun® Creature Catalog™*, *Monster Vault™*, *Player's Option: Heroes of the Feywild™*, and *Lords of Waterdeep™*.

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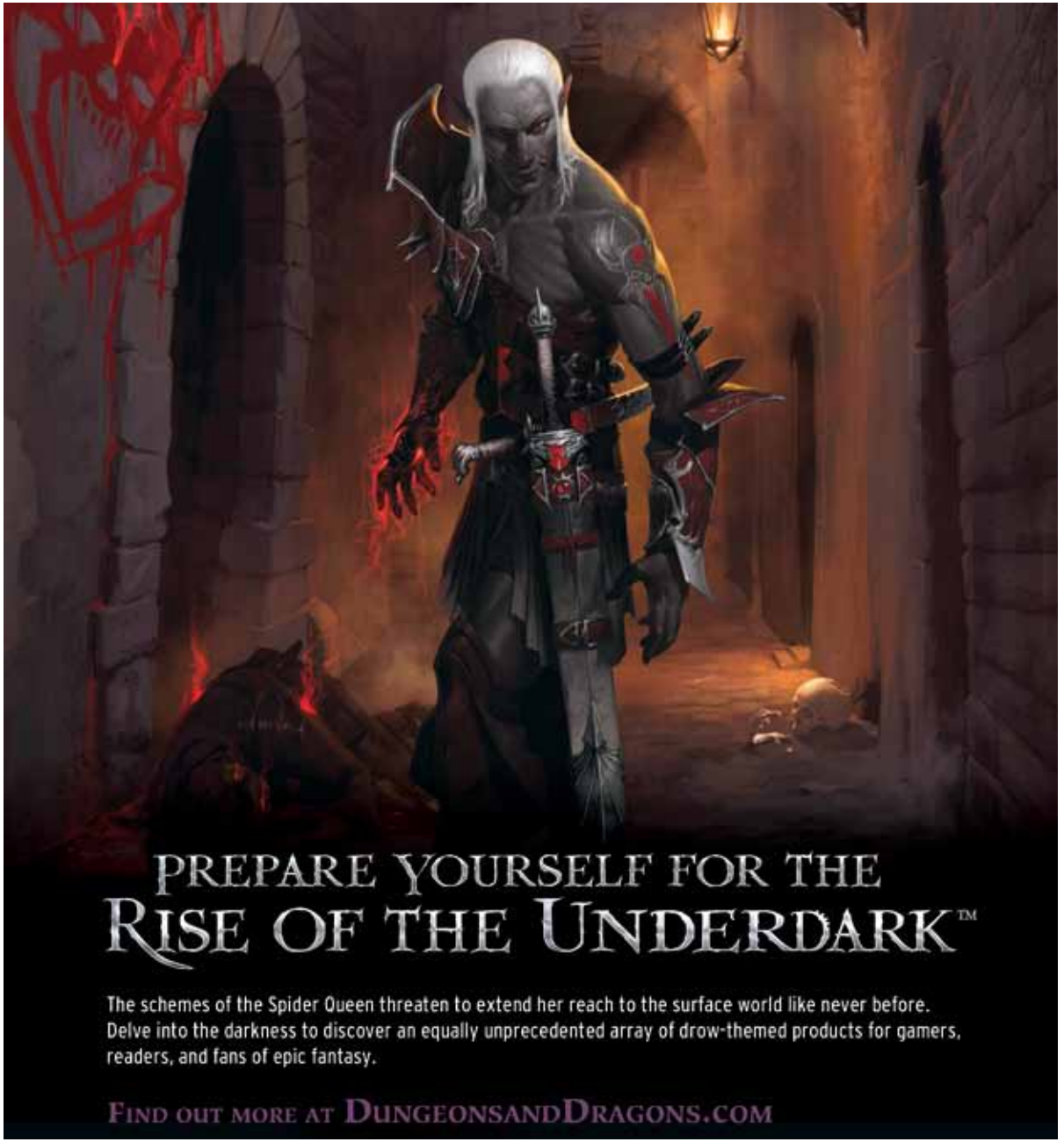
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EBERRON

Eye on Eberron

Eston

By Keith Baker

Illustration by Chris Seaman

Magic is the foundation of modern civilization, and Eston is where that foundation stands. From the everbright lanterns that light your streets to the lightning rail that carries you home, Eston is the place where magic comes to life.

—Starrin d'Cannith, Patriarch of the House

House Cannith was born in the city of Eston. Over centuries, this alliance of tinkers became a powerful guild of artificers and magewrights. Their ancestral city was a place of wonders. Clockwork birds sang in trees of steel and leather. Skycoaches carried smiths from forge to forge, and an iridescent dome deflected storms and harsh wind. The sounds of battle rose from the proving grounds, where cadres of newborn warforged prepared for active duty.

Then came the Mourning. Every mortal in Eston died that day . . . and the magic truly came to life.

State of the City

Founded on iron and adamantine, Eston initially took advantage of some of the richest veins found outside the Mror Holds. Some say that on the Day of Mourning, though, the soil turned to smoke. Eston collapsed into the mines on that day, and now much of the city remains buried in mud and wreckage. Some sections are preserved in the depths, while others remain suspended on high buttes. The Brey River has flooded the lowest regions, and the dead-gray mist of the Mournland hangs above its waters.

Eston was a heavily fortified city, and its buttressed towers and ramparts remain largely intact. The challenge is in reaching them. Whether buried in the depths or hidden in the mists, many places in Eston haven't been touched since the Day of Mourning.

Beginning less than a week after the Day of Mourning, looters and salvagers scrambled to get into the fallen city and see what they could recover. The stories told by those who have come back, such as Ikar the Black's salvage operation, evoke both fear and wonder in their listeners.

A few of the features that make the ruined city so perilous are outlined here.

The Clockwork Menagerie

Eston was a center for the creation of constructs long before the first warforged was formed. Artificers sought to prove themselves by adding their own designs to the outpouring of technology that became

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known as the Clockwork Menagerie of Eston. The most famous of these is Alaran's mighty gorgon, both a symbol of House Cannith and the guardian of its vaults. Lesser works include artificial songbirds, walking armor, a carousel of griffons, and more. Despite the name of the menagerie, the constructs come from a variety of traditions; some are alchemical, some golems, and others living constructs. At the time of the Mourning, the enclave was home to ten centuries' worth of automatons, some purely decorative and others ready for battle.

In the wake of the Mourning, the Clockwork Menagerie has become a threat. Alaran's gorgon is still active in the ruins, but it is strangely warped, its breath filled with corrupting power. Ikar the Black has reported encountering a swarm of metal beetles that consumed armor, but there is no record of anyone having designed such a construct.

Based on reports from those who have entered the area, the creatures of the menagerie are evolving. It remains to be seen if they are working toward some grander purpose, or if these changes are driven simply by the instinct for survival.

The Steel Gardens

Warforged are living things. They can physically evolve over time; a warforged juggernaut grows heavier armor plating. The Steel Gardens of Eston were one of the first breakthroughs in the long process of creating living constructs. Imagine trees with steel bark and silver leaves covering the same leathery tendrils that form the muscles of the warforged. Starrin d'Cannith had high expectations for the Steel Gardens and hoped that one day adamantine and other ores could be extracted and refined using the strange constructs.

Reports from Ikar's Salvage crew indicate that the garden has grown wild and spread across the ruins. Webs of metallic vines block passages to the mines and enshroud the remains of buildings. One Cannith sage has theorized that the roots of the garden might have reached one of Eston's three creation forges, and that the garden is a single sentient entity fueled by the mystic power of the forge.

The Fury of Shavarath

The Last War precipitated a constant demand for weapons and armor. While artificers worked on enchantments fit for kings and generals, Eston's forges produced a multitude of mundane weaponry and simple magic. The Mourning imbued these tools of war with eerie life. Swarms of blades whirl through the ruins, reminiscent of the razor storms of Shavarath. Powerful weapons often have sentience, and an explorer who wants to emerge from Eston holding a new magic sword might have to defeat it first.

Living Spells

Eston is crawling with magic—literally. When the Mourning struck, the essence of spells broke free from the objects holding them or burrowed out of the flesh of wizards and magewrights. Most living spells are in the form of oozes, whereas others have elemental forms.

Many of these embodiments of magic are harmless. For example, living continual flames crawl along the streets or cling to lampposts, but the fires surrounding these tiny slimes are cold, and the oozes flee from strangers. A scrying spell shifts and shimmers, showing distant scenes on its amorphous skin.

Other living spells are dangerous, to say the least. A fireball consumes anything that will burn, and a wall of ice surrounds its victims before chilling and crushing them.

In addition to these oozes and elemental forms, Eston has other forms of living spells—magic that remains in its original place but has transformed over time. Glyphs of warding have taken on shapes never imagined by wizards. Warped wands have unpredictable (and exceptionally powerful) effects. Such things can be dangerous threats or fabulous treasures. For a wizard who can unlock their secrets, these types of living magic can lead to spells or rituals that can't be found elsewhere in Khorvaire.

ADVENTURING IN ESTON

The Throne of Cannith is an interesting location, but it poses a number of questions for the Dungeon Master. How do the bizarre elements of Eston translate into mechanical concepts that are suitable for an adventure? How can you use an artificer's factory without showering the heroes with treasure? Consider the following.

Monsters of Eston: The *EBERRON® Campaign Setting* and *EBERRON® Campaign Guide* include examples of living spells. Any sort of construct can be adapted to the area, and plant creatures could become part of the Steel Gardens with a few minor modifications. The beetle swarm that Ikar encountered might be similar to a young rust monster swarm, with construct traits and the ability to regenerate after a successful attack on a rusting item.

Limited Treasures: Eston is a city in pieces. Many of its greatest vaults might be buried, heavily warded, or otherwise out of reach. In addition, the Mourning effectively destroyed many of the city's treasures. Explorers might find a rack that holds fifty wands—too bad the power has flowed out of them to form a living spell. Even gold and *residuum* might have been transformed by the Mourning or cannibalized by the evolving constructs that guard the city.

Eston's Forges

At the time of the Mourning, Eston had three creation forges and a large number of lesser manufacturing tools. Before that fateful day, everyone knew that a creation forge functioned by amplifying the powers of the Mark of Making; as such, a forge could be operated only by a Cannith heir.

When the Mourning transformed the magic of Eston, what could have happened to its forges? Consider these possibilities.

The Free Forge

Not only is this forge intact, but its greatest limitation has been overcome: The Mark of Making is no longer required. Operating a creation forge is usually a complex process that involves a team of trained magewrights and artificers, but with this forge, any artificer can produce new warforged. The forge would be a boon to any nation. If House Cannith hears of the free forge, it will want it destroyed. On the other hand, many warforged—notably the Lord of Blades—will see it as a possible tool to save their race. Will the adventurers try to keep the free forge a secret and learn how to use it themselves, or will they hand it over to some other agency?

Perhaps the forge has changed in more ways than one: It no longer requires the Mark of Making because it's not actually producing warforged—instead, it's creating vessels for fiends from the outer planes. Depending on your campaign, these invaders could be devils from Baator, quori from Dal Quor, or something entirely new.

War Games

Two or more of the forges have become sentient, and they are at war. One of the forges controls the constructs of the Clockwork Menagerie. The other controls the living spells and is breeding more arcane slimes in the ruined mines. The spells and the constructs are fighting each other, and adventurers might find a way to use this conflict to their advantage. At the same time, it won't be easy; both sides see the adventurers as interlopers and will ally against these common enemies.

The Becoming God

The Godforged are a warforged cult working to create a vessel for their god to inhabit. Unknown to anyone outside Eston, they have found one of the forges and are tending it. The Steel Gardens are rooted in this forge and function as a nervous system that spreads throughout the ruins. The forge can perceive events that occur around its roots, and it directs the movements of the garden. The Godforged are certain that this forge is the heart of the Becoming God and that their lord will take form in Eston. Whether the forge is truly divine or merely a construct, the Godforged will fight to the death to protect it from outsiders.

Other Adventure Ideas

It's not hard to find reasons to go to Eston. The treasures of House Cannith should be a sufficient lure for adventurers. Wealth aside, the potential for recovering Cannith research or an unlocked creation forge is a draw for the dragonmarked houses and for organizations such as the King's Dark Lanterns and the Aurum. Adventurers might be tasked to explore the ruins or to prevent enemies from looting the city.

In addition to those general hooks, here are a few more exotic reasons for visiting the ruins of Eston.

- A sage at Morgrave University is convinced that the living spells in Eston include new rituals not conceived by the mortal mind. This wizard asks the adventurers to capture a number of living spells and return them to Sharn. If they succeed, the spellcasters in the party can learn these new spells. This plot hook can be a good way to introduce spells from a new game supplement.
- The adventurers find a Cannith ledger revealing that three of the house's most powerful artifacts were stored in an Eston vault. Can the party reach this hidden safe? Are the artifacts still inside, or have they come to life?
- Thrane has been beset by a series of incursions from a band of unusual constructs, and the trail leads to Eston. One of the forges is discovered to be active, and evidence suggests that the strange warforged it produces are angelic servants of the Sovereign Host incarnated in steel and stone. These warforged want to bring the Silver Flame under the control of the Host. Can the heroes broker a truce, or do they support the divine merger? To add complexity, perhaps the "angels" are really devils from Baator, seeking to seize the power of the Flame for Asmodeus.

About the Author

Keith Baker is the creator of the Eberron campaign setting and designer of the card game *Gloom*. He lives in mortal fear that his many decks of cards will come to life and that he will die from a million paper cuts.

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D&D Outsider:
Full Plate Alchemist
Min-Maxing Your Character with Roleplaying Expertise

Written and Illustrated by Jared von Hindman

"With great power comes great responsibility"
—Ben Parker, *Amazing Fantasy* #15

"I'm just a cracker who lives in the hills with too many guns. Ya happy?!"
—Bob Lee Swagger, *Shooter*

Min-maxing. Power Gaming. Character Optimization. Cheatery Red-Mage-style. Whatever you call it, the crime of using the available tools in an effective manner is rarely punished in any criminal court of Dungeons & Dragons®. Civil cases pop up frequently, forcing repeat offenders to be incarcerated in the inescapable prison known as the Character Optimization Board ("Char-Op" for short). But should these lost souls, guilty of only mechanical excellence, be forever maligned as the foes of roleplaying and character development? Let he among us who has not taken an Expertise feat cast the first thunderstone.

Today, my friends, we take our first step down the long road of returning the fine art of min-maxing to mainstream d20 society. I'm kidding, of course . . . but some of you probably already know where this is going.

We've all experienced it to some degree. We've all got different play styles and it just makes sense for them to clash from time to time. The clash between min-maxing and roleplaying, however, is so endemic to Dungeons & Dragons that it goes into surreal

territory—fast. I mean, D&D® is an RPG, right? "Roleplaying" is right there in the name, so I should expect my players to design their character as if they were real people (or people-shaped things made out of magic crystals and unicorn dust) with rich back stories, emotions, motivations, and long-term goals for their lives.

Then again, D&D was designed by a company called TSR, which at one time stood for "Tactical Studies Rules." I don't even need to write a punch line here, do I?

How does Sadhorn Angerflames, the tragic tiefling forced into a life of adventuring he never wanted, find common ground with Bob MurderBlade, who wants only to talk about shopping and his ability to do 68 points of damage when he *misses* with an attack? In a world filled with Dungeons & Dragons Encounters™ and Dungeons & Dragons Lair Assault™, venues where no amount of talking in-character will affect the adventure, and party rosters change from game session to game session without concern for continuity, there's nowhere to run. With the current digital tools, when building a new PC, the modern gamer has access to every existing character-building option, a resource, that used to be available to only the most dedicated fans who were willing (and well enough funded) to buy every product as it came out. And even then, super fans used to have to spend evenings poring through dozens of books and taking copious notes just to get the function that you and I have instantly with the online compendium.

So, let's not fight the future, let's make it interesting.

Char-Op Anonymous

My name is Jared, and I am a serial character optimizer. I'm also a Roleplayer (with a capital "R"). I've derailed campaigns by force of will and by eating a burrito in-character (apologies to the Critical Hits crew), and I am not ashamed to admit that I have

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unique voices for pretty much all of my characters. I've sung my bard's melodies at the gaming table, including such hits as "These Boots Were Made for Waukeen," "Let Me See Your Dragon," and "Please Don't Kill Me (I Will Shame Myself by Singing this Song for as Long as it Takes for Combat to End)." And yet, I have a character with a healing surge value that's greater than his bloodied value, a druid who does more damage than any striker he's quested with, and a pyromancer who is failing at his job if he doesn't hit every enemy on the map each round.

I didn't used to be like this. I didn't used to see a new power and wonder how I could make it work better than what the designer might have been intended. I'm sure it's the same with you. Are you under the oppressive yolk of a Dungeon Master who has no qualms about slaying any character that wanders into his foul sight? Do you spend hours and hours just looking through the Character Builder, like a fantasy football fan preparing for draft night? Or maybe you're like me, sick of being mocked and realizing that the only way to balance your addiction to the Skill Focus feats is to double your character's damage output. (That'll show 'em!) Maybe you just don't have the self-control to resist equipping your slayer with a longbow, knowing that you could add three times your Dex bonus to damage rolls. But really, can you afford to resist?

Gimmick Build: Overcompensation Elation Alliteration

A few years ago, when I was first getting into D&D, someone called me a dirty name. It was Vorthos. It didn't make sense to me either but eventually I looked it up. You can read the source article yourself here here, but in a nutshell, it's someone who's playing the game differently than everyone else is and, quite often, is mechanically bad at it. Just as tournament Magic: the Gathering® players were dismissive of my "All Pictures of Elves Looking Uncomfortable" deck and its stunning 0–87 record, my fellow RPGA® players were, shall we say, "slightly critical" of the characters I brought to the table.

Vorthos players like me want to have our fun, but when that fun makes our characters liabilities that could get our friends' characters killed, we need to make an adjustment. I haven't been playing long enough to have participated in the "I'm not the type of cleric that heals people" drama, but I realized that this struggle between the player's vision of the character and the party's need for appropriate levels of mechanical support isn't a new state of affairs.

Sometimes the gimmick builds become so popular or common that they eventually get support in a product or the pages of *Dragon* magazine. For instance, since the dawn of 4E, people have been trying to play warlocks in heavy armor. Heck, in the D&D Encounters season that started after hybrids were released, my local game store had no fewer than four different players with hybrid warlocks JUST so they could start the game with heavy armor rather than having to wait until 6th level. And now? Now we officially have hexblades—melee and heavy armor focused warlocks like those we tried to cobble together using the hybrid rules.

Making your gimmick work is a pretty good way to let min-maxing into your heart. There are, of course, darker ways.

The Secret of My Excess

Say hi to Red Anchor: Full Plate Alchemist.

There are many ways to accidentally become swallowed whole by a gimmick build, and for me, it's often the release of a new character class. As it turns out, I got invited to a new table (with the stipulation that I bring a defender) at just about the same time that the cavalier paladin made its debut, so I gave the class a closer look. I noticed the escalating fun that could be had with the boost that valorous cavaliers get to their healing surge values. I didn't play defenders particularly often, so that seemed like a pretty hot thing to try to boost . . . and then I blacked out.

I awoke several hours later staring at the character builder.

You know it has happened to you. You have a weird idea and then some sort of time-wasting demon takes control of your body and things go too far. As the printer coughs your new character into the world, the fog begins to lift.

"Why is my healing surge value the same as my bloodied value?" I asked myself, shaking off my infernal possession. I was both proud and ashamed—something I think might be a healthy response to this kind of tomfoolery.

What I had in my hands was a dragonborn, with his racial bonus to healing surges, who happened to be a paladin of valor, with its own bonus to healing surges. The Swift Recovery and Enduring Mountain [Tribal] feats glared up at me, making things both better and worse. The *armor of durability* and the *belt of vigor* sat in my inventory like lead weights, both giving me a choice on which item bonus I wanted. Bizarrely I wore *alchemical gloves*, a *deep-pocket trench coat of holding*, and *gadgeteer goggles*, which helped me see and disarm traps—as a paladin. Oh, I also had an item set bonus to my healing surge value. Gah! Wait, alchemy? What are wound patches? Why would I . . . oh . . . they boost healing surge value. . . .

I found myself wondering, "Who IS this character? Did healing surges kill his parents? Does that explain why he abuses them so?"

There are easy ways to re-flavor powers and items, and there are more interesting (but also more challenging) ways. The easy way here would obviously be to label all my equipment as being "divine" in nature, and just not talk about it any further. Also, I'd simply hope that no one looked at me askance when I started slapping alchemical band-aids on myself every few rounds.

So what was my other choice?

Simply put, when you've decided to create a character using some sort of crazy build where the choices just don't fit together in an obvious way (like a tribal dragonborn paladin who wields alchemical gear strapped to his plate mail), you've got to get creative. For me it all started to come together when I was looking for a good miniature to represent Red Anchor.

Sometimes, that's all you need.

Any dragonborn player will tell you that there just aren't enough dragonborn miniatures out there. There are lots of tolerable options, but very few have the word "dragonborn" printed on their base. So picking up the Redspawn Arcaniss miniature, seeing its color, draconic origin, choice of armor, and dynamic pose, I tapped into what David Gibson taught us back in December (in an article that I say ought to be required reading for all creative players): When in doubt, re-flavor.

In my case, the Redspawn miniature let Red Anchor's weird build fall completely in place. Hitting the high octane button on the back-story machine, I made my train ride to the game session a productive

one. Being Redspawn (or a DinoBorn, if your inner twelve-years-old rules your brain like mine does), suddenly all his equipment made sense—it was loot stolen from adventurers who had been slain trying to drive out the red dragon his brood served. Somewhere along the line, Red Anchor was struck by divine insight and acquired free will, arming himself and leading a (failed) revolt against the evil.

Suddenly, instead of the players at my table meeting a bizarre paladin gimmick, they were about to meet an outcast hero, adorned in the gear of fallen enemies, and naïve to the ways of the world, having only ever met adventurers in his role as a "monster." Roleplaying and story hooks were everywhere, and having a character who was eager to adventure and see the world made it easy to slip Red Anchor into almost any party, even if he did have to make Bluff checks whenever he claimed to be a dragonborn.

The only problem with this back story was that it forced me to make Red Anchor ride a dinosaur. It just made too much sense, and as a min-maxer, ditching the out-of-combat 2-square boost to mount speed class feature for a dinosaur who stomps on goblins is made of win. The best part was, that and all the other odd choices (such as alchemical opportunist) worked together mechanically and narratively with just a tiny bit of tweaking to the race.

I never told anyone at that gaming table that Red Anchor started out as a dorky test to abusively maximize healing surge value. Sure, they noticed that particular aspect of his build, but it was just seen as a powerful quirk to a legitimate character. When I was in experimental film school (seriously, don't laugh), we were taught one thing: When someone interprets your film in a manner you didn't think of, try to keep a straight face and never tell them they're wrong. It sounds cheesy but if you give your character enough style, people aren't going to care how your character was made.

I hope that makes sense.

Part of the scowling you see from bringing a min-max gun to a roleplaying knife fight is that, with just a glance, it's easy to see what the mechanical gimmick is. But if you infuse the character with an appropriate history and roleplaying hooks, people can get beyond the raw data. How sad that, as a child, your staff-wielding, threatening reach goliath rogue was buried alive in a landslide and is left with deep personal space issues, forcing him to backstab from afar.

You get the idea. Don't sit down at the table and introduce yourself with your stats. As *The Prisoner* taught us: You are not a number.

Sure, all I'm really suggesting is laying out some narrative decoys to distract from what lies at the black heart of your character's design, but your fellow players don't need to know that, right?

Let's do one more example and then I'll stop my rambling. This one comes from the other direction . . . where a character over time just morphs into something disruptive to equality at the gaming table. At the same time, if you liked my deva or wilden and shardmind articles, you'll dig it because it'll give you a pretty robust way to fit warforged into any traditional D&D setting. That's right, I'm STILL talking about my own min-maxed characters. Just give in to it. You'll get used to it, I swear.

The Dwarforged (No, I'm serious. Really.)

There are other honest ways to come across what might very well be hyper-optimization. For instance, the classes from the Dungeons & Dragons Essentials™ line, with their streamlined design, can work as a double-edged sword. Fackel (which is German for "torch") is an example of how just following the trail a class wants to go down can lead to sorrow, as well as how applying the right narrative can soften the pain.

Back in *Dragon* 391, the school of pyromancy became available to mages everywhere. The school's straightforward "set crap on FIRE" motto was easy

to understand and, at level 14, Fackel's powers each have the Fire keyword in there somewhere. So, building on the idea that his school wanted him to focus on fire, combined with the fact that fire spells very rarely had special effects beyond causing damage and, y'know, setting things on fire, Fackel was on the fast track to Inferno Town.

Here's the breakdown of the mechanical doom. Sadly, I can't blame this one on a D&D-induced fugue state. I think once you start looking at feats such as Burn Everything and Immolate the Masses, you've reached the point of no return (as well as giving you something to talk to your therapist about). Dual-implement spellcaster + implement focus + pyromancy's bonus to fire attacks + a *cinder wand's* bonus to fire attacks + a *flame wand's* bonus to fire attacks + destructive wizardry (bonus if you hit more than one) + a bonus against bloodied enemies . . . it all adds up to a crazy assortment of fire that means you're doing striker damage with a wizard. Throw in the suggested paragon path that maximizes damage and a utility power that increases your damage by another 3–7 and . . . you get the idea.

It all happened rather slowly over the course of the last year or so (unlike Red Anchor who jumped into a campaign fully formed, like from the forehead of Zeus) and, since this was the RPGA, it didn't call on any rare or quirky item purchases.

So here's the question: Is this my fault? The pyromancy school is designed for you to be all about damage, and to love doing damage—with fire. *Heroes of the Elemental Chaos* ramps that up even more.

In our game, Fackel has a reputation for being overpowered when compared to the rest of the party's members. And yet, no one's asked me to retire him or scale him back a little, which is odd because our crew's preferences have leaned in that direction on a number of occasions. So why is Fackel still around?

Roleplaying.

If you're going to play a character who is simply mechanically BETTER than the characters around him (balance isn't everything, right?), you're going to need a more dramatic description than "I kill things with knives." A rich backstory can go a long way to making an overpowered character more palatable.

In Fackel's case, I killed two birds with one stone. (Where do these expressions come from? Thank Pelor for the Internet and video games, because apparently our grandparents had some very deranged forms of entertainment.) When warforged—creatures created for the Eberron® campaign setting—were made legal for use in the Living Forgotten Realms™, there was a lot of warforged-rage among the LFR players, mostly because it's hard for some folks to see past the robotic exterior. I wanted to see if I could make a warforged that worked within the parameters of the organized play setting. My solution? Hit the re-flavor button!

Fackel HearthHammer is a dwarforged mage. Instead of focusing on the unnatural, otherworldly nature of the warforged, I spun it right back around to make them integral to the setting. The history of

any D&D campaign involves at least one great empire that fell ages ago, forgotten magics, and a litany of great wars. (Well, not-so-great ultimately, but you get my point.) And wars lead to strange innovations. If you can't raise an army, sometimes you have to build one. Although gnomes are known to dabble in the art of tinkering and invention, dwarfs are the great weaponsmiths, and the sheer strength of a warforged character just stinks of dwarven craftsmanship.

In my game, warforged were built to replace important dwarves that fell during "The Great War," gaining the deceased's dwarven name and the responsibility to fulfill whatever role that dwarf played in battle. Legend said that an arcane reflection of the namesake fired the never-sputtering furnace within the warforged's heart (tapping tangentially into the real-world golem myth) meaning that dwarforged really were alive.

Look carefully at the text describing the race and you'll notice that while says that they have no need to eat or drink, it never says anything about them being UNABLE to enjoy those sensual pleasures. The warforged component item "spiked soles" even lets a dwarforged mirror a dwarf's racial ability to avoid forced movement.

Yes, dwarforged are rare and mostly forgotten, relics of a long ago war, but they are a reasonable re-flavoring of warforged. And this re-flavoring gives them direct ties to a core D&D race, making them fit into the world better.

Their bodies might be repurposed forges of steel and stone, but once a dwarf, always a dwarf. That fire monster he summons? That's actually his fiery soul stepping out for some air. It all works if you just twist it a bit. Naturally, they still have pride in their clans and the mines back at home, and even though they don't *need* to drink, they still fill their flagons with the dwarven ale and raise a toast to the good old days. Not even death can stop some dwarves from being downright dwarven.

Narrative flourish has taken a character that would otherwise be pigeonholed into the "min-maxed freak" category and given him a chance to prove that he's a real character. Okay, maybe my examples are extreme examples of the power of re-flavoring, but they prove that no matter what's going on mechanically, you can find a story to make it work. I'm not here to promote making crazily unbalanced mechanical monstrosities and attempting to disguise them as legitimate characters with a thin veneer of narrative. I'm here to promote taking the time to make your characters more than just the sum of their mechanics.

It never hurts, and often, a little creative tinkering pushes you into places you wouldn't otherwise have gone. You'll be surprised, when you finally look up, to see how far you've gone.

Not everyone has the same "power gamer guilt" that I do, nor should they. It really depends on the play style of those around you. That said, if you can find a way to make your character choices make sense within the scope of a roleplaying world, so much the better. The DM will thank you in advance. He or she still might not be happy with how you've built your character, but you'll be surprised at what those sneaky people hiding behind reference screens will tolerate if it's engaging.

If you're going to play an unstoppable engine of death, it'd be criminal to make that engine boring. And if you've made your demigod of murder boring to talk to, something has gone horribly wrong.

—Jared, D&D Outsider

About the Author

Jared von Hindman is an artist, writer, and some-time comedian whose comics, paintings and poor choice of words have dwelt upon this very website since 2009. When not drawing on sidewalks in Eternal Chalk, he lairs in Berlin, Germany. Visit Jared on Twitter @JaredvonHindman.

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